Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by chibi
III
Unnamed Memory
Vows for Eternity

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Unnamed Memory III
Vows for Eternity

"Appear, my everlasting stones."
Minute tremors sounded from the earth in reply to Leonora's words.
Dumbfounded, Tinasha identified the structure that had slept below the wasteland. It was something from one of the myths surrounding Leonora.
"...The Amber Castle."
"Isn't it gorgeous? I made it a long time ago."
The object's eruption through the sand was heralded by terrible quaking. A titanic block of amber caught the sun's rays, glittering gold.

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NEW YORK

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Volume 3
Kuji Furumiya
Translation by Sarah Tangney
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Character Profiles

Farsas

Oscar

Current king of the Kingdom of Farsas. Bearer of the legendary royal sword Akashia, which can neutralize magic.

Tinasha

Also known as the Witch of the Azure Moon. Formed a contract with Oscar to stay with him for one year and try to break his curse.

Lazar

Oscar's childhood friend and a royal attendant. A young man who has been through a lot in the service of his lord.

Als

A general. The most capable person in the military and Oscar's sparring partner.

Meredina

A commanding officer. Als's childhood friend and a woman who boasts incredible sword skills.

Kav

A mage. A very inquisitive young man who doesn't shy away from Tinasha.

Kumu

A mage. An older man who's the current royal chief mage.

Sylvia

A mage. A beautiful blond woman who is sweet and kind but a little ditzy.

Doan

A mage. A talented young man who is well-known to be the next in line for the position of royal chief mage.

Yarda

Leonora

Also known as the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned. An old acquaintance of Tinasha's. She is proficient in healing magic.

Unai

Leonora's long-standing right-hand man and a swordsman. Has dark skin, red hair, and red eyes.

Savas

The prince of Yarda, the country to the east of Farsas. He is captivated by Leonora.

Nephelli

The princess of Yarda and Savas's younger sister. She is currently missing after having been involved in the rupture of the court.

Zisis

The prime minister of Yarda. Opposes Savas and plots to take over the country.

Others

Travis

A high-ranking demon. He conceals his identity and acts as a duke of Gandona and Aurelia's guardian.

Aurelia

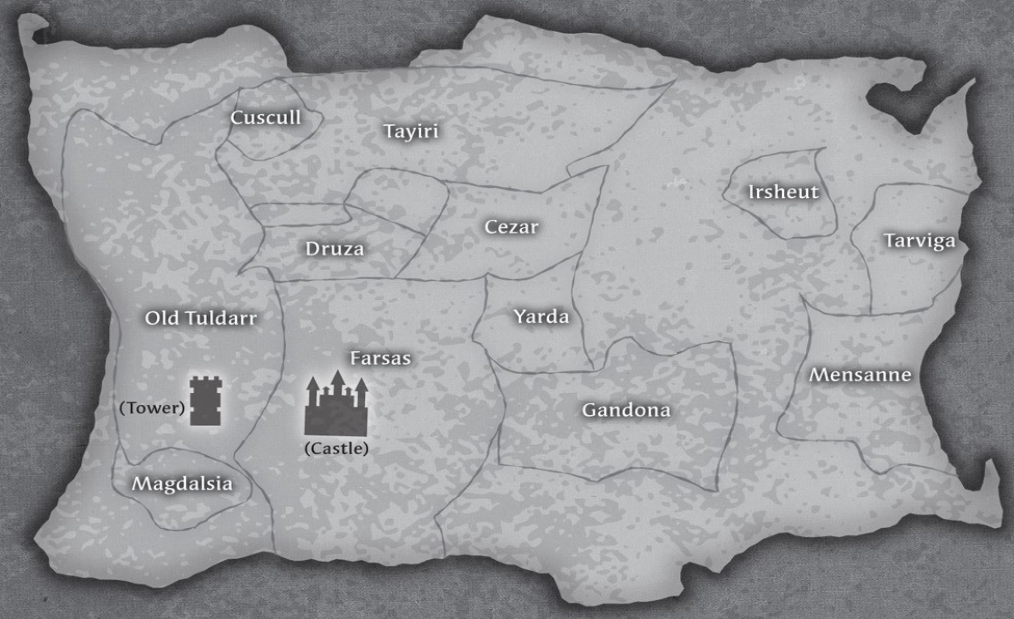
A girl belonging to the royal family of Gandona. She possesses mysterious abilities and is always accompanied by Travis.

Lucrezia

Also known as the Witch of the Forbidden Forest. Tinasha's friend who lives deep in a wooded area in the northeastern lands of Farsas.

The Lands of *Unnamed Memory*

Current Year: 1654 (526 by Farsas historical reckoning)



After the gods fled, the Dark Age descended on this land.
During this era of betrayal and war, some nations
came to flourish while others perished.
After seven hundred years, the age came to a close.
Amid the blossoming peace, a new calamity emerged.
Five women standing in the shadows of history—
each an embodiment of incredible power.
This new time would come to be
known as the Age of Witches.

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1. The Consequences of Striking a Deal

Farsas was a nation situated near the middle of the mainland.

Expansive lands and stability characterized this country. What's more, a witch lived in its royal castle.

There were only five witches in all the world. While technically mages, these women possessed much more substantial powers than common magic users and had lived for centuries.

The one known as the strongest of this quintet was Tinasha. She was also the one who lived in Farsas.

Tinasha had signed a contract to be the king's protector for one year, and she was also the queen of an ancient magic empire; when it came to spells, there was nothing she couldn't do.

The powerful woman typically spent her time leisurely reading books while fending off relentless marriage proposals from Farsas's young king.

"Oscar's not here… Why…?"

Rain had suddenly arrived that afternoon, blanketing the sky in thin clouds. The poor weather had put an end to Tinasha's magic training. When she returned to the king's study, she found that Oscar was curiously absent.

Tinasha had long hair the color of inky darkness and eyes of the same hue. Her true age surpassed four hundred years, though her physical body appeared only nineteen, as the witch had stopped it from aging. Her beauty was like a work of art, enough to make anyone gasp, though astonishment now colored her own features for a change.

"Where in the world did he go…?" Tinasha muttered.

Oscar should be working at this hour; he'd even told Tinasha as much this morning.

Yet he was nowhere to be found. It was possible he'd slunk off somewhere while Tinasha had been preoccupied. Thinking of how the king had snuck out in the past and gotten himself involved in all sorts of unsavory situations, Tinasha's lovely face twitched.

"If he's done it again, I'm going to hang him from my tower."

Regardless of his royal position, Oscar was a reckless lover of adventure. While he was confident he could get himself out of most scrapes, that was irrelevant. Since Tinasha's first encounter with him several months ago, she had assumed the role of his chaperone. She stomped back out into the hallway, cheeks puffed in annoyance.

There, she ran into three ladies-in-waiting. "Oh, Miss Tinasha…," they said, looking confused to see her emerging from the study.

While some folks in the castle had warmed up to the witch living there, more were still afraid of her. A faint smile on her lips, Tinasha pointed to the study door. "Did you need something from Oscar? I'm afraid he's out."

"No… We actually had a favor to ask of you," one servant said timidly.

"Of me?" Tinasha asked with some surprise, pointing to herself.

Instead of working, Oscar was entertaining guests. In a small room off the audience chamber, the king's attendant, Lazar, filled Tinasha in on the situation. "The guest is Duke Soanos, a member of an aristocratic family in Mensanne to the east. He's also a well-known wealthy merchant. Because he has major clout just about everywhere on the mainland, he must be received with respect, even if his arrival was sudden…"

"Oscar's dealing with a lot," Tinasha remarked feelingly. She didn't breathe a word of how she'd previously sworn to string him up.

Lazar eyed her with some puzzlement. "Miss Tinasha, what are you wearing…?"

"It's a long story…"

Beneath the witch's usual black mage's garb, she was clad in a gorgeous light-pink gown, and her hair was done in a loose braid. Gentle touches of makeup lent a hint of innocence to her unparalleled beauty.

Altogether it resulted in an impression that was wholly different from the one Tinasha usually gave off. Now she looked like a young noblewoman. She glanced back at the ladies-in-waiting who had helped her change. One of them turned pale and lowered her head. "I'm really very sorry. We've asked too much of you…"

"It's all right. I'll do what I can."

Duke Soanos had come with his daughter. Just like her father, she traded in jewelry and accessories in every country. Earlier, she had procured a necklace from a merchant who was related to one of the ladies-in-waiting.

However, the item in question was an heirloom meant to be given to the lady by her grandmother. It had been sold by mistake. Unfortunately, when this was explained to Eleisa, Duke Soanos's daughter, she refused to return it. Even the offer to repurchase it at a markup didn't sway her. In the end, the lady-in-waiting had to give up on the necklace, chided by her own family as well.

"So you've been asked to help recapture it, Miss Tinasha?" summarized Lazar.

“‘Recapture’ makes it sound like I’m going to steal it by force. I’m going to engage in ordinary negotiations to secure its return.”

“But hasn’t Eleisa already refused once?” Lazar inquired, looking toward the wronged lady-in-waiting.

Hesitantly, the servant explained, “There’s a legend in my family that wearing that necklace on your wedding day means you’ll have a lifetime of happiness. It’s been passed down from generation to generation… I planned to wear it at my own wedding next year.”

“Ah, one would want something that precious back,” said Lazar.

Tinasha cut in. “Merchants like to size up customers, so if I pretend to be a big spender, she might go for my offer. Oscar probably wants to get back to his work soon; he should be glad when I come to relieve him.”

Tinasha picked up the hem of her voluminous gown. Her cool, clear allure and royal upbringing gave her an air of refined elegance.

Lazar was entranced by her for a moment, then caught himself and nodded. “I understand. I’ll go explain this to His Majesty.”

“There’s no time. I’ll go with you. While I’m introducing myself, you grab Oscar and alert him to the situation. I’ll improvise,” Tinasha stated.

“What…? Won’t that just make the situation more difficult?” asked Lazar.

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry. If things truly go sour, I’ll just cast psychological magic on everyone.”

“That would be a last resort indeed…,” Lazar remarked dryly as he and the witch walked up to the door leading to the audience chamber.

Just before pushing it open, Tinasha turned back to smile at the lady-in-waiting, saying, “Leave it to me. Please wait there.”

Tinasha flashed the servant a brilliant smile, and the lady-in-waiting dropped into a deep curtsy.

With that, Tinasha stepped into the audience chamber.
Ordinarily, the room contained only a throne, but presently there was a wide table set up for the merchants’ visit. On it, Duke Soanos had laid out an array of expensive wares.

Across the table stood the master of the castle, a handsome young man with a toned physique. Despite his young age of twenty-one, he was king because Farsas’s ruler always had to be a capable swordsman.

The blade he carried, the royal sword Akashia, was the only one in the world that could neutralize any magic. With that weapon in hand, he had beaten all the trials in Tinasha’s tower and brought her back as his protector. His original goal was to have her break the curse placed on him by another witch—a hex that doomed him never to father an heir. Then he had proposed that Tinasha herself carry his child, since she was more powerful than the curse. Unsurprisingly, Tinasha had shot that down. Instead, she’d spent the last half year researching and analyzing the spell before successfully breaking it, which brought things to where they stood now.

Released from his curse, Oscar could now choose anyone he wanted for his queen, but his heart was still set on marrying Tinasha.

Oscar's eyes widened as he noticed her enter the room. "Tinasha? What's going on?"

"I heard that we had some guests and came to introduce myself," she said with formality and charm.

At that, the two guests turned to behold this new arrival. Duke Soanos was a man in the prime of life with suntanned skin. Sailing around the mainland had built him into a powerful fellow. By contrast, his daughter Eleisa was a lovely young girl in her late teens. Her chestnut-brown eyes glittered with marked curiosity as she looked at Tinasha, who answered the gaze with a graceful smile.

"Your Majesty, this would be…?" inquired Duke Soanos.

Before Tinasha could answer, Oscar spoke. "This is my future wife."

"Excuse me?!" cried the witch as her plans crumbled before her.

"This is why I said we'd need to lay the groundwork ahead of time…," murmured Lazar, disheartened.

Eleisa appeared shocked by this strange visitor. After a pause of several seconds, she whirled back to Oscar. "This is Your Majesty's…queen?"

"Yes. Tinasha, come here," Oscar invited, motioning casually to beckon her over.

Tinasha muttered, "Seems I'll have to resort to mind magic."

"It's still too early, Miss Tinasha," Lazar whispered back.

She wanted to flip the table and start all of this over, but Oscar's position was more important—especially in front of international guests in addition to castle staff. So Tinasha smiled like a gracious young lady and circled around the table to come stand next to him.

She curtsied to the two visitors. "It is wonderful to make your acquaintance. My name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna. I do apologize for intruding on your meeting."

The name Tuldarr, as in the Magic Empire of Tuldarr that had fallen four hundred years ago, was conspicuously missing from Tinasha's introduction. Using it would risk exposing her identity. Regardless, anyone with such a clearly storied name was undoubtedly royalty or at least of the nobility. It was enough to establish Tinasha as a very important customer.

Oscar studied Tinasha raptly, taking in every aspect of her new look. "Has something happened? I didn't think you'd be interested in this."

"I heard that these were discerning guests who have traveled far and wide. And it seems they have something I desire."

"That's unusual. What is it? I'll buy it for you," replied Oscar.

"Oscar, Lazar is calling you," Tinasha stated with a smile, attempting to fob Oscar off on his friend. The royal attendant shook his head furiously, desperate not to get involved.

Tinasha was almost tempted to really use psychological magic to alter everyone's memories.

However, the witch stopped herself and beheld the guests with a pleasant expression on her face. “What I want is a necklace that promises a lifetime of happiness when worn on one’s wedding day, one that’s made of large pearls and sapphires using ancient craftsmanship. I’d heard it was an heirloom of a merchant family in town, but now the word is that your daughter recently came into possession of it.”

“My Eleisa did?” asked the duke, looking at his child. Tinasha didn’t miss how the young woman’s eyes flashed with indecision and cunning for a moment.

What Eleisa had paid for the necklace was a fair price for an old piece in good condition. Yet she had refused to sell it back even for double that price. Tinasha could offer more, of course, but if she pushed it too far, it could saddle the lady-in-waiting with a feeling that she was indebted for the gesture. The first step was to open negotiations.

Eleisa beamed, as if the moment of uncertainty she’d shown had never existed. “An item that I purchased…? I see. There are so many of them, I wonder which it is… Could you first tell me why you’d like that specific piece?”

“Because I decided I want it for myself,” Tinasha answered plainly.

Eleisa likely suspected that the former owner of the necklace was involved. If that hunch was confirmed, she’d dig in her heels and refuse to relinquish the item. That was why Tinasha had to emphasize that she herself was the one who sought the necklace. Tinasha had lived for centuries, and her facade was perfect in the face of Eleisa’s scrutinizing gaze.

“A wedding necklace? *You* want one?” interjected Oscar.

“Oscar, I told you that Lazar is calling you. Isn’t that right, Lazar?” Tinasha mentioned again, shooting Lazar a dark glance infused with silent authority.

He nodded, his head bobbing up and down. “Y-Your Majesty. I need to inform you…”

“I’ll hear it later. More importantly, show me any necklace you have that fits that description. I’ll buy it for the asking price,” Oscar stated.

“Why are you so keen on getting this for me?” demanded Tinasha.

“If you’re going to use it at our wedding, then it’s just as much something for me as it is for you. It seems only natural that I’d pay for it.”

“It’s not for… I mean, I don’t want you spoiling me! I’ll buy my things myself!” Tinasha protested.

“Anyway, I’m glad to see you’re finally ready to marry me. We’ve gotta get your dress made. I’ll call over the seamstress.” Oscar tried to pull Tinasha into a hug.

“Too soon, too soon! You just be quiet!” she cried, pushing him away by planting her hands on his chest. It was the usual sort of bickering the pair got into. Unfortunately, they’d both forgotten about their guests.

Suddenly remembering her goal, Tinasha escaped Oscar's arms and turned her attention back to Eleisa. "I am very sorry you had to witness that. However, I'm the one interested in the necklace. If you could be so kind as to show it to me…"

The intent look she gave Eleisa was straightforward, with none of her witch's power underlying it. Eleisa stared at her, an inscrutable expression on her face.

Her father piped up. "I had heard that His Majesty's fiancée is the Witch of the Azure Moon. Is that you?"

"…So you were aware," admitted Tinasha.

"Word of His Majesty taking you back after the war has made its way to us," he said.

"I imagine it would…," she said, shrinking in on herself at the awkwardness of the situation.

Not too long ago, a war had broken out that involved every country in the land. The witch was at the center of it, and during the postwar arrangements, Oscar had informed everyone that she was his fiancée so he could gain custody of her. Naturally, such a wild story would not have spread from coast to coast, but it was understandable that someone who dealt with the movers and shakers in all the major countries would have learned of it.

Tinasha was getting fed up with this situation, which she was only in as a favor to someone else. It might be time to act like a witch and knock everything over.

Tinasha bit back a sigh and began to think up a spell. Then Eleisa asked, "Your Majesty, are you really going to make her your queen?"

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?" replied Oscar.

"…She's a witch," answered Eleisa in a faltering tone. But Tinasha was all too familiar with what she said and the look in her eyes.

Fear, hatred, jealousy, lack of sympathy… Everything that would be directed at something foreign and strange was in her gaze.

After living for four centuries, Tinasha was utterly inured to such looks. With a wince, she started to speak up in defense of Oscar's honor.

Before she could, however, he grinned. "But we're perfectly balanced, so I'd say it works out great. With her for my wife, I won't want for anything," Oscar stated proudly, not ashamed in the slightest. It was apparent from his words that he had full confidence in himself.

He was completely steady in his mind—as a king and as the master of the royal sword.

To defeat the curse he'd suffered as a child, he hadn't allowed himself to have any weakness. It was how he became one of the greatest swordsmen in the land and conquered Tinasha's tower.

And that was why Tinasha had trained him into someone who could kill her.

Oscar was capable of slaying a witch. If that wasn't balance, Tinasha didn't know what was.

"You are so…," she began, a smile coming to her lips entirely naturally as her dark eyes narrowed fondly. Her prepared words vanished, as the witch no longer thought them important. Oscar's hand came to her cheek, and she found it very comfortable.

Duke Soanos watched the two, then let out a little sigh and said to his daughter, "Eleisa, take the necklace out."

"But, Father…"

"We take pride in providing people with what they want," he answered quietly. Eleisa bit her lip and drew something wrapped in cloth from a box at her feet.

The necklace that emerged from the black velvet shone calmly, as if promising a modest amount of happiness.

※

"Miss Tinasha, thank you so much, truly!" cried the young lady-in-waiting, bowing over and over as she clutched the necklace box to her chest.

She was teary-eyed as she expressed her gratitude, and Tinasha hurriedly waved it away. "There's no need to feel indebted to me. It was Oscar who smoothed things over in the end."

The king had gone back to his work. Tinasha comforted the endlessly grateful lady-in-waiting. When at last she was free again, the witch made for Oscar's study. When she entered in her dress, he was there to give her a sarcastic grin. "Why do you seem to make it a point to dash my hopes periodically?"

"Considering the situation, it should have been obvious that the betrothal bit was a lie!" snapped Tinasha.

"Even so, I thought maybe something had happened… I let myself get my hopes up a little."

"…I'm sorry for that."

Once Duke Soanos had departed, Tinasha had given Oscar a rundown of the situation, and he'd heaved a huge sigh. Guilt had already needled at Tinasha for the act, but now she felt even worse. She felt like she'd really done something untoward this time. After all, Oscar had helped her get the necklace back, and all he had to show for it now was disappointment.

"I apologize for misleading you. I should have acted more like a witch and resolved it with magic from the start," Tinasha said dejectedly.

"Hold on, why is such an extreme option your primary choice?" Oscar asked, motioning Tinasha over. She floated into the air, mindful of the skirt of her gown, and settled down on the armrest of his chair.

Lazar had brewed the tea, something that Tinasha typically did, and he proclaimed in a satisfied tone, "I'm relieved you got the necklace back for the original sale price."

“That’s because Eleisa knew she couldn’t win against this one here,” stated Oscar.

“Hmm? What does that mean?” Tinasha inquired, turning to look at him.

Oscar caught up her loosely plaited braid in his fingers. “That piece was for weddings, right? She wanted to use it herself, which is why she was so unwilling to return it.”

“Oh… I see. But what does that have to do with me?” Tinasha pressed.

“Those two originally came to sell me on taking Eleisa as my queen. Their plot went awry, which is why they stood down.”

“…O-oh, so that’s what it was,” Tinasha said.

As the unmarried ruler of a mighty nation, Oscar was the ideal buyer for the father-and-daughter traders. Eleisa had had her eyes on becoming queen of Farsas, but she’d relinquished the necklace upon realizing that wasn’t going to happen.

A bitter smile on his lips, Oscar pulled the witch onto his lap. “That was also why the ladies-in-waiting came to you. It wasn’t because they wanted your magic. They thought Eleisa would concede once you showed up. It’s because you’re doted on like a pet kitten.”

“Doted on by whom?”

“By me,” Oscar responded instantaneously, and Tinasha’s eyes widened just like a real cat’s.

Immediately, she hugged her knees to her chest with mixed feelings. “I feel like…I had no idea and wasted everyone’s time.”

“I profited in the end. I got to return to my work, *and* I got to see you in a new outfit,” Oscar replied.

“Seems like I cause you no end of trouble,” stated Tinasha.

“It’s fine.”

The witch let out a little sigh. But even so, she was glad to have helped someone. It felt strange that, despite her magic being all but unparalleled, the ladies hadn’t come asking for a spell. However, as Tinasha thought, she realized that wasn’t so rare an occurrence since she’d forged her contract with Oscar.

She lifted off lightly into the air, and Oscar craned his neck to look up at her. “Don’t worry about it. I’m feeling pleased. The fact that they asked you for that favor means you’re settling into the castle.”

“Oscar…”

The young king gave her a magnanimous smile and returned to his paperwork. From the air, she stared down at him.

Only three months remained on their contract. What would happen before it expired? And perhaps more importantly, what would come after?

For someone like Tinasha, who had lived over four hundred years, three months was practically nothing. That said, she still couldn’t imagine saying good-bye to Oscar. It probably wouldn’t feel real until the day before the contract ended.

“No such thing as…a contract without end,” Tinasha murmured, turning upside down and resting her chin in her hands.

She kept her eyes fixed right on the king.

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The lady-in-waiting hadn’t known what to do when the merchant’s daughter had refused to sell back the necklace, but she felt glad that she’d mustered the courage to ask the witch for help.

When she returned to the drawing room for the ladies-in-waiting, her friends all asked her how it had gone. With a sigh of relief, she explained, “She got it back for me. She’s a much more normal person than I had thought…”

Countless frightening fairy tales painted witches as terrible creatures, which was why everyone had been scared when a witch came to their castle. The truth of it, however, was that Tinasha was a very ordinary and reasonable person.

The other ladies-in-waiting had gotten to know the witch over the past few months, and they grinned at their friend. “That’s what we told you! She’s perfectly nice.”

“Yes, she is… I feel so relieved,” said the young woman. Now she could prepare for her wedding. While it wasn’t until next year, she knew the time would pass quickly.

By the time of her marriage, the contract between the king and the witch would have ended. What would happen to the king when the object of his affection went away? The young lady-in-waiting stared at the necklace in her hands. “I hope she can become queen…”

“Come now, that kind of talk’s disrespectful,” one girl chided.

“Girls, come on, get back to work,” ordered the head lady-in-waiting, clapping her hands, and they all scattered.

The young lady-in-waiting went to place the necklace in a box with a magic lock—but suddenly felt someone’s eyes on her. When she turned to look, she saw a young woman garbed in the same outfit she was wearing. This new arrival had black hair and pretty features, but something about her seemed off. It wasn’t someone the young lady-in-waiting recognized, and she cocked her head. “Are you new here?”

There’d been no announcement of a new staff member. Curiously, none of the other servants had taken any notice of her.

A smile bloomed on the unfamiliar woman’s face like a wild, decadent flower. “Yes. I’ll just be here a short time, but I hope we’ll get along.”

Her voice had a smoky timbre, tinged with ennui.

It sounded like a broken song.

2. The Outcast’s Thorn

Farsas had a mild, temperate climate year-round, but it grew chillier for two to three months a year.

On one enjoyable day, a cool breeze blew in from the open windows.

At work in his study, Oscar heard the faint sound of someone singing on the breeze and paused. It was the witch’s voice.

Lazar looked up from the pile of papers he’d tidied. “That’s Miss Tinasha. It’s rare for her to sing.”

“Wonder what’s going on,” said Oscar.

He’d heard Tinasha sing numerous times before, but it had always been for some purpose. He wondered if she had a reason now, too.

The king puzzled over it as he went about his work with her tune as background noise. Oscar frowned when he saw Lazar depart with a pile of papers only to return with a plate of candies. “What are you doing with that?”

“Ah, well, I bumped into Pamyra… We got to talking about the singing, and she gave me these.”

“I don’t understand… Is she up to something again?” Oscar inquired.

By “she,” he didn’t mean Pamyra, but the witch Pamyra served. Lazar tilted his head in bafflement, placing the dish of sweets on Oscar’s desk.

Ten minutes later, the plate was empty.

※

“And that’s how you cast a curse song,” Tinasha concluded. Her tune completed, she looked to Als and Meredina with a strained smile on her face.

The usual group of mages was assembled in the lounge, joined today by the two military officers. They had been brought in to serve as test subjects, so to speak.

The mages watched Als and Meredina with bated breath, but the two had no idea why everyone was staring at them so intently. Completely

unaware, Als took a sip of his tea. It was so full of sugar that not all of it had dissolved.

The mage Renart turned away in disgust. “I could get heartburn just looking at that…”

“And yet he has no idea. Amazing.”

“That’s how it works,” explained the witch, wetting her throat with a sip of her own, unsweetened, tea. After taking some deep breaths and doing some stretching, she resumed her lecture. “However, curse songs are never especially powerful, because they are fundamentally the same as curses. Casting them on a large number of people will weaken their efficacy, and mages can resist their influence without too much trouble.”

Upon hearing that, Doan piped up with interest, “How many people can one realistically control?”

“Hmm, it depends on the caster’s abilities, but curse songs should be able to manipulate people’s moods and simple actions. However, it’s difficult to make them do anything that would directly harm others or themselves if they did not originally desire to do so in the first place. Where curse songs excel is their power to compel people to take spontaneous action without being aware that they’re being manipulated. The victim is lucid and conscious.”

Everyone looked at Als. He scooped up the remaining sugar in his cup and ate it.

Sylvia gazed at him sympathetically. “Can a curse song be undone…?”

“Only if it’s designed to be. That’s why the most dangerous curse songs are the ones sung by those who are unaware of what they are. While that does occasionally happen, those singers typically don’t possess a significant amount of magic, so the effect will wear off naturally with time. Another way to cure the effects is to purge the magic that entered the listener’s body,” answered Tinasha.

Sylvia nodded, and then it was Kav’s turn to ask a question. “So then what if the curse is placed intentionally by a powerful mage?”

“It would be pretty difficult to undo,” the witch admitted, letting out a little sigh and cocking her head thoughtfully to one side, then the other, then back again. “You would need time and effort to break a curse song with a solid spell configuration woven into it. One basic complication of curse songs is that they must be sung well to be effective. It must make the listener focus on the tune. If they are paying only partial attention, the effects won’t sink in. The caster must have both magic and musical talent, which sets the bar high in terms of prerequisites.”

“I see,” Kav responded. The mages all bobbed their heads, though Als and Meredina did not. Not many people could sing a curse song, so this was a good learning experience for the mages. Throughout history, many unsolved cases had borne footnotes acknowledging that the various curious circumstances could have been the result of curse songs. No such incident had been recorded in the past three hundred years, however.

Meredina was silent; she knew they were discussing music, but she couldn't grasp the nuances. She took a sugar cube out of the jar and munched on it. All eyes went to her, and the witch frowned. "This is getting to be unhealthy, so I'll undo the spell."

"Tinasha!"

The cry of her name came from the doorway, and she flinched reflexively. There was only one person in the castle who called her by just her name and nothing else. She turned around nervously to see Oscar standing there looking extremely unhappy.

"Wh-what is it…?" she asked.

"You did something with your song just now, didn't you?"

"You heard it?!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"It appears he did, and I gave him a plate of candies…," said Pamyra with a pained look on her face.

The witch was speechless.

"I feel sick," complained Oscar.

"I'm sorry…," replied the witch, hanging her head again. She'd undone the curse. Als was slumped over the desk, moaning about heartburn. Oscar was downing some strong tea. Never in his life had he consumed so much candy. He felt nauseous. Meredina, however, wasn't quite as weak to sugary things. She was quietly sipping at a cup of straight tea.

Oscar turned a baleful eye to Tinasha. "Maybe you should have summoned some *other* people to this castle."

"I set it to wear off in thirty minutes… Ow, ow, ow!" she cried. Oscar was grinding his fists against her temples as he glared around at the other mages. They all wore guilty looks, hanging their heads as their king reprimanded them.

"I was glad for the rare treat of your song, and here you were up to no good," Oscar said.

"I believed a practical demonstration would be the easiest to understand…," Tinasha answered.

Oscar had found it strange that she was singing for no reason, but the purpose had turned out to be more terrible than he could have suspected. Not only that, but her song was also infused with magic, just like one that had until recently been leading people to their deaths. Oscar recalled what he'd learned back during that incident. "If the song is done well, it can control people's hearts to some degree even if there's no magic behind it, right?"

"If it's written well, too, yes. That's actually very rare," responded Tinasha.

"You are strangely good at singing," he accused.

"I did once make my living as a singer," she replied.

Everyone was surprised to hear this unexpected bit of Tinasha lore. She had lived in the Tuldarr palace as a potential queen until she was thirteen and became a witch. Oscar suddenly realized he didn't know when exactly

she'd moved into her tower. He cast a doubtful look at Tinasha, and she winced.

"The first hundred years I was a witch, I did a lot of different things. I didn't know how to live alone. Still, I hated humans at the time, so I focused on activities I could do without needing to talk with anyone."

"So singing," Oscar deduced.

"Right after I left my country, I turned into a sort of adventurer. I learned sword fighting a little later on. It's good to try out all kinds of things," Tinasha said with a peaceful smile. It was unimaginable to think of her as someone who had once despised people. However, when one considered the events leading up to her becoming a witch, it had been practically unavoidable.

Tinasha had grown up in the royal palace of Tuldarr since infancy, knowing nothing of things beyond the walls. Then she suddenly lost everything and found herself pushed out alone into the world. What had she gone through to get here? Thinking of her four hundred years of hardships, Oscar could only stroke the witch's hair. She closed her eyes happily as he did.

Oscar didn't think he'd ever understand all of what she'd gone through. It would be arrogant to believe he could.

Tinasha had walked her own path, and she was here now.

Realizing that everyone regarded her with pity, the witch rushed to dismiss their concerns. "Oh no, it's nothing like what you must be imagining. I was pretty wild."

"You were wild, huh?" said Oscar.

"Well… Yes…," Tinasha answered with a nod, giving him a hesitant smile.

Witches tended to be fickle creatures who wreaked havoc, but Tinasha now was nothing like that. Resting his chin on one hand, Oscar eyed her. "Sounds like you cast a curse song or two."

"……"

"…Don't tell me you actually did."

"No—well… Mm…," Tinasha replied evasively. She took a sip of tea as everyone stared at her. She pressed a finger to her temple. "To be totally honest, almost all the curse song incidents that broke out right after the fall of Tuldarr were my doing. They're probably the limit of that sort of magic."

"…What?"

All were stunned silent. Even Oscar had nothing to say.

The events Tinasha was referring to were all ancient historical mysteries. One involved a city in Gandona suddenly lifting off and landing in different places. Another involved the members of a massive band of weapon thieves attacking one another while preparing for their next raid. The one thing all the witnesses from each case had in common was testifying that they had heard a woman singing, which had made people conclude that a curse song was responsible.

Having revealed that she was the culprit, Tinasha sipped awkwardly at her tea. Oscar stared at her with some exasperation. “What did you think you were doing…?”

“At the time, I was young and short tempered,” she explained.

“You’re pretty short tempered now, too,” he shot back.

“I’ve actually gotten a lot better!” Tinasha objected, and that was the end of the subject.

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Minister of the Interior Nessan, several other magistrates, and Chief Mage Kumu assembled for a conference. They brought with them the year’s reports from major cities, compiled for posterity.

A new king had taken the throne. However, even prior to his coronation, Oscar had assumed almost all of his father’s duties, so there were no particular issues in the domestic affairs of Farsas. The magistrates tied a cord around the pile of reports and paused for a break.

The year ended next month. Though there had been many troubles in recent days, it looked like things would wrap up with no significant issues. The group of politicians felt like a weight had been lifted from their shoulders as they made their way down the hall to the records vault.

“Now, if we could just get an heir, all our troubles would be gone,” said one magistrate nonchalantly. Nessan and Kumu grimaced. It had taken fifteen years to be able to indulge hopes like that. A witch’s curse had robbed the Farsas royal lineage of any future succession, but a different witch had recently broken that hex. Only a select few knew of all that, however.

“It wouldn’t take long if Lady Tinasha would just acquiesce.”

“She might make the most beautiful queen in our history.”

“…But she’s a witch. I can’t consent to that.”

The curt comment put an end to the lighthearted talk. The surly magistrate who’d interrupted the flow of conversation was the head of financial affairs, Norman. In terms of age, he was nearing his prime, and he made no secret of his disgust as he spat, “There’s far more suitable candidates. Even if you weren’t serious, nothing about the idea of taking a witch for our queen is funny to me.”

“Well… Yes, she’s a witch, but she’s the queen of Tuldarr,” one magistrate pointed out mildly.

Tinasha was the rightful successor to the Magic Empire from four hundred years ago. That was why she’d inherited Tuldarr’s traditional twelve mystical spirits, as well as numerous other legacies. Her vast knowledge was a fortune in things thought lost to the ages.

Yet Norman remained unflinching in his position. “Queen? Her country hasn’t existed for a long time. It’s downright unseemly that someone has survived for four centuries after the destruction of their country.”

“No, she—,” Chief Mage Kumu began, starting to inform Norman of why he was wrong. But he hesitated.

Why *had* Tinasha lived as a witch for so long? It was to free the souls of her people, trapped by a forbidden curse when Tuldarr fell. While none could rival her in strength, it had taken her four hundred long years to see that goal completed. It was heartrending to imagine how much she must have suffered in that time. Still, it wasn’t Kumu’s place to inform others of her circumstances without permission.

And besides—the people of this world shunned the witches.

A belief that had persisted for centuries wouldn’t be changed so quickly. Even if Kumu told Norman the truth about Tinasha, it didn’t mean Norman would think favorably of her.

After several seconds of contemplation, Kumu noticed someone standing in the shadows of the intersecting hallway. When he met her gaze, she offered him an awkward smile while pressing a finger to her lips. Next to her was the lady mage who served her, eyes blazing with rage as she glared at the entire entourage.

“Oh…,” murmured Nessan from his place next to Kumu as he caught sight of her there. That made everyone stop in their tracks; they realized that the person they were discussing had heard every word.

While most of the magistrates looked ashamed, Norman stood firm against the witch. “If you heard us talking, then that simplifies things. Do you acknowledge that you are the harlot that’s ruining our country?”

“The harlot that’s ruining the country? I’m not trying to do anything of the sort,” Tinasha answered.

“That’s going too far, Norman,” Nessan scolded, but the witch held up a hand to stop him.

“It’s fine. I’ve heard worse before, and I’m used to it. Please don’t feel concerned on my behalf,” she said.

“But…,” Nessan argued, clearly torn.

Norman pushed him aside and stepped forward. “As long as His Majesty is obsessed with you, our country will have no queen. I believe just the other day you wedged your way into marriage talks with Duke Soanos’s daughter?”

“Ah, that was… Well, yes. I’m sorry…,” Tinasha apologized, abashed.

“I’m glad you seem to be conscious of it. Evidently, there isn’t much time left in your contract, so I trust that you’ll settle your accounts properly.”

Norman’s defiant remarks made Tinasha’s dark eyes grow wide. Immediately, she winced.

“I can erase Oscar’s memories.”

“Miss Tinasha, that wouldn’t be—,” protested Kumu, face paling at her casual suggestion. Except for Norman, the other magistrates appeared similarly shaken. They were all well aware of how much their king treasured the witch. From birth, Oscar had been saddled with inescapable obligations; his fondness for her was the one personal attachment he displayed. Would

he allow someone to take that away just because it got in the way of his duties?

Tinasha shrugged, picking up on how everyone was flabbergasted. “But Oscar would be furious if he found out, so we’d have to proceed carefully. He’s terrifying when he gets mad… I don’t want to make him angry…”

“Scary? You, a witch, find him scary? How preposterous,” snorted Norman. “That said, it appears you’re aware of the sort of filthy creature you are. Very good. Know your place.”

“How dare you—”

“Pamyra, calm down,” Tanasha soothed with a light pat to Pamyra’s shoulder. “It’s fine. Witches, after all, are bringers of disaster. We wield too much power for one individual to possess. I’m glad that some haven’t forgotten that. It’s simply a fact that witches are to be despised.”

Her self-deprecating speech left Norman and the rest of the magistrates astonished.

Over the nine months since she’d come to the castle, Tinasha had acted as Oscar’s protector and assisted with many different things. While none could question that, the witch had also found herself at the center of multiple controversial events, such as the recent war. And even if Tinasha was friendly with Farsas, other witches were not—namely the Witch of Silence, who had placed the curse on the royal family.

Instinctively, Kumu let out a sigh. Perhaps because of his frequent association with Tinasha, he’d half forgotten that. The other bureaucrats probably felt the same. Tinasha smiled at them like a flower under the moonlight, then led Pamyra away.

The group watched them go. Only Norman glared balefully at her as she walked away.

“I want to rip up that rude mouth of his!” fumed Pamyra, still hissing mad. She and her lady were now walking along a corridor that faced the gardens.

“Calm down,” Tinasha urged, a wry smile on her lips. The truth was, she’d suffered far worse abuse throughout her long life. Norman’s remarks were on the more mature side…and entirely to be expected.

Tinasha flipped back her long braid. “He wasn’t wrong.”

“Don’t say that yourself!” cried Pamyra.

The witch froze with a start. Outside, the sun was just starting to set. Tinasha looked up at the sky and clapped her hands together as if recalling something. “Pamyra, let’s go for a stroll.”

“What?”

Immediately after that, the two of them floated up into the sky. Pamyra wasn’t flying on her own. The witch was using her magic to levitate them both. With a wide-eyed Pamyra in tow, Tinasha floated up higher into the sky. Soon the castle looked like a miniature of itself, encircled by the surrounding city.

Once the two women were nearly touching the clouds, Tinasha finally halted their ascent. “Go on, look out at the scenery and calm down,”

Tinasha instructed blithely, crossing her legs in midair and settling into that pose.

The cityscape spread out far below them. The sight seemed to go on forever, and Pamyra couldn't help freezing up in fear. While she could use magic to fly, she'd never come up this high before. Thankfully, it wasn't cold or hard to breathe, because Tinasha had erected a barrier around them.

Taking deep breaths, Pamyra calmed herself down. As her fear faded, so did her anger.

Looking to the west, she saw that faint red streaks were already beginning to appear on the horizon. The slow gradient from crimson to deep blue made for an incomparably stunning sight.

Pamyra cast a sidelong glance at her lady. "You're very tolerant."

"I'm not, though. I just think I shouldn't forget what I am," Tinasha replied, smiling like an innocent girl. Her clear, fleeting expression gave Pamyra the notion that Tinasha's entire existence was an illusion. She worried that if she looked away, the witch would disappear.

"Were you serious about what you said back there, Lady Tinasha? About tampering with His Majesty's memories…"

"Yes, if it becomes necessary. Psychological magic works on him."

"B-but if you do that, he'll forget all about you!"

The witch had lived in solitude for four hundred years, alone with her thoughts.

For someone like her, life in the castle must have been her first hard-won bit of peace. The king had gifted it to her with all his love. If Oscar's memory of it all was erased, Tinasha would have to return to her solitude. That was what Pamyra meant when she protested.

"Even if he forgets, I'll remember. So it's fine," Tinasha said in a lilting whisper.

She gave Pamyra a sunny grin. "I just want him to find happiness normally. That's enough for me to be happy, too."

"…Lady Tinasha."

The witch's eyes betrayed no lie. But for her to desire that Oscar be contented, even if he forgot her—that was certainly not romantic love.

Swallowing back what she wanted to say, Pamyra gazed at her lady's lovely face. Tinasha caught her glance and broke into a wide grin. "But I'm positive that he'll carry out his duty properly, even if I don't do anything. He's very strong. That man's confident, and he doesn't hesitate. Me, on the other hand, I've always—"

Tinasha broke off there, closing her eyes.

The lonely witch living all alone in a tower.

The truth was that Tinasha had bid farewell to every previous person she'd formed a contract with and returned to her isolated home. It was natural for a creature like her to exist with a loneliness unlike anything others experienced.

However, the reason she'd lived all these years was gone now. At present, Tinasha's only purpose was to act as the king's protector. And that would end in three months.

She had atoned for the past, and yet she remained.

The queen without a throne stared off into the northwest, toward where her homeland had once stood. "…Why am I still living?"

"What are you saying?!" cried Pamyra sharply, the exclamation causing Tinasha to flinch slightly. She had let that question slip unconsciously, and now Pamyra looked close to tears.

Tinasha rushed to reach out for the other woman. "I-I'm sorry."

"Don't say such ridiculous things! If you want to die, live among other humans and meet your end as one of them! I won't stand for anything else!"

"You can't be serious…," Tinasha said, at a complete loss as to how to respond. Pamyra was doing her best to hold back sobs.

Had things gone as planned, Tinasha would have become the Magic Empire's queen and lived out a life of luxury and ease. Why then was she now considering simply ending her life? Didn't she deserve to hope for some joy to balance out her long suffering?

Cutting off a sniffle, Pamyra evenly met Tinasha's eyes. "You should let yourself be happy… That's my wish for you."

Tinasha gasped slightly before wrapping Pamyra in her slender arms. In her ear, the witch whispered, "I'm plenty content. Thank you."

Her voice was captivatingly beautiful, tinged with a kindness that spoke of sadness.

Within the warmth of the witch's arms, Pamyra closed her wet eyes. More than anyone in the world, she desired for her lady to be happy. Yet all she'd managed was to get Tinasha to soothe her like one would a child. It reminded Pamyra that she was powerless compared to her lady and that only one could reach the witch.

The person who was her equal, the man she'd signed a contract with.

When Tinasha saw that Pamyra had finally settled down, she gave her a calm smile. The witch loosened her hold on her attendant and pointed far into the distance. "Look, the sky's beautiful."

The sun had set, and only the very edge of the horizon was tinted red.

The sky was a brilliant shade of blue—not entirely dark or light, just the exact color it was.

As Tinasha beheld the entrancing hue, something occurred to her, and she retrieved a crystal sphere from her waist pouch. Using no incantation, she wove a spell and poured it into the ball.

"What are you doing?" inquired Pamyra.

"I'm making a copy of the color."

Even as Tinasha spoke, the crystal sphere was turning the exact shade of the sky. After half a minute, the globe contained a whole world of sunset. Pamyra let out a small sound of wonder.

The bright hue of early night was precisely the color of Oscar's eyes.

Tinasha held the little globe before her face. "…What a pretty color," she remarked.

The witch recalled when she'd first met him—and everything that had happened since.

None could question that he treasured her.

Like a young child.

Like a woman.

Tinasha had never heard of someone guarding their own protector. She was scared of how natural he made it seem.

She stared at the crystal sphere.

"I guess a year *was* a long time…"

Why did admitting as much make her heart ache? She didn't know.

After finishing work and changing clothes in his chambers, Oscar heard a light rap at his balcony door. Immediately, he broke into a grin. When he gave the okay, the witch entered.

Oscar turned around and immediately recognized that something about Tinasha was different, although he couldn't put his finger on precisely what. She looked the tiniest bit shaken.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

Tinasha cocked her head, bemused. "No, nothing. Here, this is a present for you."

She handed Oscar something. He rolled the object on his palm, inspecting it. It looked like a crystal sphere, but a scene was captured inside. A sky the same color as his eyes spanned the top half of the small globe. Oscar brought the orb up to his face to get a better look at it.

"It's just a simple token of appreciation. The heavens were particularly beautiful today," Tinasha explained.

"You *made* this?!" Oscar exclaimed.

"Yes."

"It never fails to surprise me how many different interesting things you can do… Thank you," he replied. After gingerly closing his palm around the bauble, he placed it on his nightstand. Tinasha perched lightly on the bed next to him.

As he tugged on her hair, he asked, "So, did something happen?"

"What? No, nothing. Why do you ask?"

"You seem a little down."

"I'm fine," Tinasha answered, smiling brightly, but she snaked her right hand behind her back. On reflex, Oscar caught hold of it.

Tinasha looked startled. "Wh-what?"

"You were just casting a spell, weren't you? What was it?"

"…I'm not sure you're actually human," the witch muttered in disgust. Surrendering, she held up her caught limb. "It's nothing. I just thought I'd try out some psychological magic."

"I don't really understand, but next time, just tell me before you try it."

If this were Tinasha's fellow witch Lucrezia, it would be some nasty prank. However, since it was Tinasha, Oscar trusted she had a better reason than that.

He sounded so easygoing about it that Tinasha gave a wan smile as she nodded. Maybe it was Oscar's imagination, but her dark eyes looked more unreliable than usual.

Early during their time together, her gaze had occasionally betrayed a kind of loneliness—as if she were searching for something. After she diverted the magical lakes, that impatience had disappeared, only to be replaced by flashes of helpless anxiety. By nature, Tinasha was not someone who pursued selfish desires. Now that the witch's goal in life was gone, it was like she was hanging in limbo.

Oscar traced his fingertips along her fair cheeks. He almost told her what he was thinking, but decided against voicing it out loud. Instead, Oscar brought his face close to hers. She closed her eyes and accepted his kiss, but when he pulled back, her cheeks were dusted with pink. "You shouldn't do that sort of thing too often…"

"I'll consider it," Oscar replied, making it plain that he had no intention of following that suggestion.

Tinasha glowered at him, then lifted her arms up and stretched tall. "I-I'm worried…"

"About what?"

"A lot of things…like life."

Oscar had been expecting that sort of response. With a straight face, he replied instantly, "I think you should marry me."

"I'm not going to."

"So stubborn…"

Tinasha threw her arms across her eyes. A sense of instability emanated from her petite frame, making her appear fragile.

Oscar stared at her. "You should marry me and quit being a witch."

"What? Quit it how?" she pressed.

"Just get older normally, like you used to." Oscar had planned to broach this subject with her at some point—to ask her if she wanted to live and die with him in this castle.

He was steady as a rock and deadly serious.

Tinasha, on the other hand, let her arms fall and stared back at him with wide, round eyes. "Get older…?"

Putting aside all the talk of marriage, even she had considered restoring her body's aging. Physically she was roughly nineteen. Once she was no longer Oscar's protector, she'd unfreeze time on herself, vacate her tower, and live out the rest of her days shut away from others. Ending things that way had a sort of appeal to it.

Oscar reached out and touched her cheek again. "You've got dozens of years left, right? That's plenty. Give them to me."

He looked so genuine that Tinasha wanted to burst out laughing. She thought to protest that she wasn't the only stubborn one. "You really have strange taste in women."

"Shut up. You're very important to me. Don't put yourself down," Oscar said with a frown, and then he kissed her again.

With her eyes closed, she smiled wryly. "You're quick to forget what I just said."

"I only agreed to consider. If you don't like this, just say so," Oscar retorted bluntly.

Slowly, Tinasha opened her eyes, lashes fluttering. Before she truly considered what she was saying, the words had spilled from her lips. "I suppose it says something that I've gotten used to you touching me like this. I think you must be…special to me."

Tinasha only stated the truth, but once she had admitted as much aloud, she felt the disclosure held a curious weight and honesty.

The witch had realized a long time ago that this stubborn, pigheaded man was someone important to her. It had caught her unawares. No matter who had asked her, she undoubtedly would have responded the same.

Looking up, Tinasha saw the shock on Oscar's face.

She didn't understand why he would look so surprised, and she reached out to brush the backs of her fingers along his cheek. "Is something the matter?"

"No…"

Oscar couldn't give any more of an answer than that. He reached out and pulled Tinasha to him. She peeped up at him innocently, and he rained kisses down on her forehead, her cheeks, her lips.

Warmth flared in each place he touched.

Their souls connected, separated only by skin.

It was so precious and sad that they were not the same person.

Caught up in his arms, Tinasha was startled but reassured by this warmth at the same time. His body heat poured into her still-wavering heart.

It felt like he was spoiling her terribly.

And she didn't want to drown in it.

Oscar's gentle warmth gradually seeped down all the way to the bottom of her heart, glowing there. Mind-numbing heat slowly welled up within Tinasha.

His kisses landed on her ears, her neck, her chest.

If she let her mind wander, she'd give in completely. With a shaky exhalation, she managed, "Oscar… We can't."

"Why?" he asked, not looking up.

Every place he touched was a point of heat, spreading out all over Tinasha's body. She didn't know if she was holding herself up on her own. Feeling dizzy, she sagged limply in his arms. Oscar laid her down on the bed. She reached up as if to touch the blue eyes gazing down at her.

"'Why'…? What do you mean, 'Why?' " Tinasha questioned.

“Think about it yourself,” Oscar answered disinterestedly, but it was the truth.

Tinasha had to consider the answer on her own. There was nothing outside to look to. It would be within her.

She had lived for such a very long time. Not once had she loved or hated anyone.

It had seemed opening up to anyone would make her weak—that she wouldn’t be able to go on living.

I have to think about it.

Tinasha reached out, wanting something. Her fingertips grazed Oscar’s hair.

I have to think…

However, the sensation of his fingers and lips stole away her thoughts before they could take shape. She was falling headlong into the heat.

We still can’t…

The witch shook her head minutely, though she remained silent. She had no grasp on anything and was feeling faint.

Without understanding a thing, she was aware of giving herself over to him.

Every place Oscar touched on her forbidden snow-white skin was so smooth it could melt under his caress.

When he kissed her eyelids, she let out a hoarse moan. Each one of her little noises was thick with emotion. He wanted to cherish all of them—all of her.

She should learn that people can live out their days in peace without madly pursuing some overarching goal. She should live happily among other people, at his side.

He sat up and gazed at her. She looked back at him, her eyes flickering in the darkness. “Oscar…?”

Her voice sounded so low and seductive that he got chills. She reached out for him imploringly, and he caught her hand and pressed his lips to her palm. Her body, still hidden from his sight, was like passionate fire. Oscar dragged his fingers along her softest spots, burying his face in her neck—but just then, he heard scuffling outside his door.

Immediately, there was a violent banging.

“What is it…?”

Oscar saw that the impudent noise had brought the witch back to herself in an instant and felt like groaning. He wanted to grab her close, but she slid away like a cat and disappeared.

Cursing under his breath at how unlucky he was, Oscar headed for the door. He opened it to find Lazar there.

“You’re not allowed to complain even if I kill you…,” growled Oscar.

“Wh-what…? No, Your Majesty, we have a problem! Demonic spirits have gotten into the castle… Fire-breathing ones!”

“What the hell?!” Oscar cried with great displeasure, not entirely comprehending at first.

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She automatically teleported herself back to her chamber.

In the dark room, Tinasha stared at her hands in shock. “I—I wasn’t acting right!”

She had been uncharacteristically hesitant. It was true that she felt anxious, although that didn’t explain it. And she hadn’t hated his touch.

The distinct sense that she was sinking deep into something had overcome the woman before she’d known what was occurring. Her mind and body had begun to dissolve.

Tinasha pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks—

“Huh?”

A strange sensation prickled at her, like a drop of blood in a vast sea.

Tinasha looked out the window and saw a crimson ribbon had cut its way across the night sky. Flames illuminated the ebon, and large shadows flitted about in the air. They were much larger than birds—undoubtedly some sort of demonic spirit.

“…The wards.”

Something had secretly opened a hole in the castle wards. That was the source of that strange sensation.

All at once, Tinasha changed. A witch’s composure replaced her girlish insecurity.

A scowl marred her beautiful features as she readjusted her disheveled bodice and lifted off the ground to teleport away.

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It shouldn’t ordinarily have been possible for demonic spirits to invade Farsas Castle because of the wards enacted by the king’s protector, the witch. The only thing that had ever penetrated the protective spells was the demonic beast during the war seventy years ago. Thus this sudden attack threw the place into chaos.

In the cloudless skies above the castle, six-foot-tall creatures were flying all around.

At a glance, there appeared to be fifty demonic spirits with thin, humanoid forms, pure-black skin, and bat wings. They swooped down, broke through windows, and raked their sharp claws at anyone they happened upon. The soldiers stationed in the gardens were firing determined shots back at them, but there were already casualties. One fighter was running along a corridor when a set of talons dived out of the darkness and caught his arm.

In the next moment, the limb was ripped off at the root. Blood spurted, and the poor man fell to the floor, causing the nearby lady-in-waiting to let out a terrible shriek.

“AAAAHHHH!”

However, when she fled out into the gardens, another demonic spirit set its sights on her and dived down.

Faintly glinting talons sought her flesh, but the spirit’s body was cleaved in two by the stroke of a sword before that came to pass.

It was Als. “Form groups of at least three!” he called to his officers. “Don’t leave any blind spots! If you can’t fight, don’t go outside!”

Though it was night, bright-red splotches lit up the sky.

Als had already heard reports that the glow was coming from fires at the rear of the castle. It was near impossible to deal with the flames while also battling demonic spirits, but mages were headed to extinguish the blaze.

Right now, the priority was to eliminate incursive force.

Just then, another woman’s scream sounded from the direction of the castle gate.

Als looked and saw a lady-in-waiting with a thick cloth around her head cowering behind a guard, who had his sword out to defend her. Als hurriedly drew a dagger and expertly hurled it at the spirit attacking them.

※

Norman was organizing the records vault late into the night when he heard an odd commotion outside and looked up. Puzzled, he took up a lamp and opened the vault door.

The sky was scarlet. Flames illuminated the skies as the shadows of multiple demonic spirits swooped and dived.

“What in the world?!” he shouted reflexively, attracting the attention of two demonic spirits flying nearby. They changed direction and headed for him. Their eyes glinted red, locking him in place.

I have to get inside and shut the door.

He knew that, but his legs wouldn’t move. It was like his body wasn’t his own.

As he stood frozen in place, a set of alabaster claws bore down on him.

Norman swallowed and prepared to meet death.

Much to his surprise, however, he was not to die today.

An overwhelming force crushed the demonic spirit’s body. A witch dressed in black alighted from behind.

She lifted an ivory hand toward the other demonic spirit. “Get out of my sight.”

Her words were powerful. The creature’s form scattered without a sound. Norman gaped in astonishment as it turned to dust and vanished. He was having trouble comprehending exactly what was happening.

The witch turned to him. “Are you hurt?”

"…Ah, no… I'm fine."

"Then get inside. Don't come out until it's over."

Her cool voice carried a naturally commanding presence. In her dark gaze was unquestionable power. A strong force of will and an unwavering authority dwelled there. Norman's king possessed the same qualities. For the first time, Norman understood that this witch was a queen.

Concealing his surprise, he bowed his head to her of his own volition. "Please fight well…and take care of His Majesty."

She nodded and disappeared. Norman retreated into the records vault and prayed for the safety of the castle.

Tinasha sensed that about a hundred demonic spirits had somehow slipped past her wards.

This was a demonic invasion on an unprecedented scale. Any typical keep would've been razed to the ground.

More than the enemy's numbers, Tinasha was concerned with how they had been sent through her magical defenses.

"If I take too long, they're likely to escape…"

Floating in the skies above the castle, Tinasha reached out, searching among the many demonic auras for the summoner responsible.

Several spirits noticed her and flew for her with strange cries. She narrowed her eyes and held her right hand out before her. A brilliantly glowing ball of light formed in her palm before lancing forward.

The brilliant burst morphed into a spray, dousing and dispelling the creatures that had swarmed her. Tinasha immediately shouted, "Senn! Karr! Mila! Nil! Kunai! Come!"

Five mystical spirits materialized in the air in response to her order. Tinasha gave them a succinct command. "Kill the demonic spirits. No exceptions. Go."

Each of the five gave their assent and disappeared. Wasting no time, the witch began an incantation.

"Recognize my will as law, transformer that sleeps in the earth and flies in the sky. I control your water and summon you. Know my command to be every concept of your manifestation."

Moisture from the air gathered and froze in Tinasha's right hand. She brought her left hand over it, refining the spell configuration further. In a flash, the water had assumed the shape of countless droplets. It looked like a rainstorm collected in her palm, and Tinasha flung it at the blazing outbuildings at the rear of the castle. She sped through the sky in hot pursuit of the summoner.

The mage Doan, tasked with firefighting, was growing worried at the seemingly unending blaze as he hurled spells to destroy any demonic spirits that came attacking. The fire showed no signs of dying out, likely because it was magical in nature. The tip of the flames writhed like a tongue, climbing up in an unnatural way.

"This is bad… If it keeps up, it could spread to the castle."

The attack was a curious one. Doan had been pondering it for a while now. An enemy who could launch an offense of this magnitude on the castle must not know about Tinasha. If they had, wouldn't they have factored the witch into their strategy?

In that case, Doan didn't know where the enemy would get tripped up. He and his fellows needed to have the full picture as soon as possible.

Sadly, they'd failed to put out a single fire yet.

Just as Doan was considering having all the mages unite to cast one large spell, a heavy shower began to fall. The droplets doused the fires and set up a barrier to contain them. Red flames flickered within the thin, filmy seal.

"This is…Miss Tinasha's doing. She's saved us."

With the witch's barrier, they didn't need to worry about the blaze spreading. Breathing a sigh of relief, Doan began to weave another fire-dousing spell.

※

Oscar and General Granfort entered the courtyard and made their way to the castle gate, the former cutting down every demonic spirit that even drew close. Lazar had given orders for everyone in the castle to evacuate. Right now, all Oscar needed to do was clean up the invaders.

By the time he had slain twelve of the things, he and General Granfort had at last reached the gate. Just ahead, Als and his officers were fighting a tough battle in the plaza.

Als noticed Oscar and called out, "Your Majesty! You're all right!"

"What the hell is all this…?" grumbled Oscar, stabbing Akashia into a demonic spirit that came winging down from the sky. It had been making to cut off Oscar's head, and he plunged his weapon into its throat with tremendous force.

The demonic spirit fell to the ground, still clutching Akashia as it died. Annoyed, Oscar made to pull out the royal sword. That was when another demonic spirit seized its chance to attack.

"Whoa there."

He dodged to the right as sharp claws came for him, then used his left hand to grab hold of the spirit's leg. With a move that looked effortless but was packed with fearsome strength, he slammed the spirit to the ground. As it groaned on the hard ground, Oscar pulled out Akashia and used it to decapitate the spirit.

While he was doing that, Als came running up. "Your Majesty."

"I'm fine," Oscar replied, looking up at the sky. There were far fewer demonic spirits than there had been at the beginning. It looked like they were fighting against something in the sky. The bat-winged things were clearly losing the struggle. Granfort approached the king and pointed at a small-statured figure floating in the night sky. "What's that up there?"

“Those are…Tinasha’s spirits.”

A girl with hair of deep crimson was laughing with glee as she loosed magic attacks. All the mystical spirits commanded by the witch were high-ranking demons. Oscar took in the sight of the girl and the few others that Tinasha had called upon, relaxing a little. “If she’s released her spirits, then it’s only a matter of time. Als, see to the wounded.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Als.

After making sure no demonic spirits were coming for him, Oscar returned Akashia to its sheath. The ground was littered with dead spirits, and it seemed the invasion was coming to an end. Mages came running in and began treating the wounded.

As they did, Oscar called over several officers and ordered them to go assess the situation. No sooner had they hurried off at his command than the witch appeared overhead. She slowly descended until she was floating before him.

“Tinasha, how’s it going?” Oscar inquired.

“The fire appears to be out. I went after the summoner, but they did a good job concealing their tracks. I’m sorry,” she apologized.

“They must have some skill to give you the slip.”

“I’m so ashamed…,” Tinasha admitted, hanging her head guiltily.

Oscar winced. “In any case, we’ve got cleanup to do. Sorry, but could you help out?”

“Sure,” the witch replied, landing on the ground and hurrying over to the wounded. As he watched her go, Oscar felt reassured by how normal she looked. She hadn’t come to him during the fighting, and Oscar had worried that he’d pushed things too far. However, now that she was back before him, he knew they could work something out later.

“Man, this is one tough opponent we’re up against. Did they throw things into a panic only to run off?” he murmured.

As demonic spirits were involved, the enemy had to be a powerful mage, but their goal remained unknown. Oscar surveyed the dead demonic spirit bodies scattered about.

Fortunately, there were not many casualties. Soldiers carried over a few of their wounded fellows. With them came the lady-in-waiting whose head was wrapped in thick cloth. She looked terribly worried. As the group passed by the king on their way inside the castle to take refuge, the lady-in-waiting stumbled a bit. Oscar reached out to steady her.

The cloth on her head fell to the ground. Her gaze was so intense it all but threatened to pierce Oscar through.

He recognized her—this was someone who shouldn’t be here.

“You’re…”

Just before he could say her name, he felt a light jolt of pain on the hand he’d caught her with. He jerked back instinctively, and the pain turned sharp and acute.

She let out a loud cackle of delight. Her bizarre laugh caught the attention of Als and Tinasha, who turned to look.

“Clara?!” cried Tinasha.

The madwoman’s eyes locked on to the witch, and she gave her a scornful smirk.

Tinasha caught sight of the man collapsed next to her and cried out, “OSCAR!”

The witch’s scream tore through the night. Tinasha dashed across the grass. Without sparing a glance at the gleeful madwoman, she flew to Oscar’s side. “Why…?”

Nothing had come into contact with the protective barrier she had placed on the king, and yet he had fainted—was this psychological magic or something similar to it? Tinasha touched him and poured magic into his unconscious body. She could tell his body temperature was dropping fast. His pulse was weak, and he was losing color. It was obvious that if this went on, he would die.

And yet—Tinasha couldn’t locate any traces of magic in his body.

“This shouldn’t…”

Tinasha shook her head. Panic made breathing difficult for her. She was flustered half out of her mind, but she looked up as that high, shrill laugh resounded again.

Clara, who should have been banished from the country after her involvement with the song that had killed people, was now dressed as a lady-in-waiting. Elation clear, she murmured to the witch, “How about you follow him into death, hmm?”

The woman held out an object to show it to Tinasha. It was a long silver needle. Half of it was discolored and black; Tinasha was speechless. Dropping her gaze back down to Oscar, she realized that his left hand had turned the same color.

“…A natural poison.”

That was why there were no traces of magic. It was a naturally occurring toxin, not something created by spells.

Because the poison was challenging to produce and obtain, it was very rarely used nowadays—and most magic couldn’t neutralize its effects.

Black spots swam before Tinasha’s eyes. By the time the witch was lucid again, she was already casting a spell. She grasped Oscar’s discolored hand in one of her own and thrust her other on his forehead.

“Recognize my will as law, transformer that is the axis on which the world turns. I reject you. You will stay where you are. I will not allow you to leave. I reject you. Reject you. Reject you—”

Sweat beaded on Tinasha’s forehead. She repeated the words like a prayer. As the spell took shape, it abruptly slowed the passage of time in Oscar’s body. But that wouldn’t restore the life draining from him. All she could do now was bring him to a standstill.

“I reject you, reject you…”

Als came running over, quickly shackling Clara, who was still grinning maniacally.

Tinasha continued to chant, desperation bleeding into her voice.

※

Considering the strangeness of the attack and its scope, the damage was relatively insignificant. While many were wounded, fewer than ten were dead, and only the wooden outbuildings had burned down. Any other keep would have suffered far worse.

But that wasn't the true extent of the losses.

Kevin, the former king, heard the news and rushed to his son's bedroom in a panic. Because of the late hour, there were only a few royal council members, some officers involved in suppressing the attack, and a handful of mages in the room.

The room's occupant was laid out on the bed. Next to him knelt the witch. Her eyes were closed as she clutched his hand and held her forehead pressed to the back of it, as motionless as a doll. The man lying on the bed was just as still.

Gingerly, Kevin made his way over to the two of them and examined his son. His body was pale, and Kevin couldn't sense the life-sustaining heartbeat that should be there.

"What happened…?"

The witch looked up. Her eyes were filled with a hollow light. "His body is in a state of suspended animation. I had no other way to keep him going…"

"So is he alive?" the former king asked.

"He is, but he's been poisoned. If I return time to normal for him, he'll die within minutes."

Kevin was taken aback by the news, and Als filled him in on the rest. A woman who had been banished from Farsas had gotten some sort of help to infiltrate the castle, and she had used a needle to exploit a weakness in Oscar's magical barrier and poison him.

"What of the woman?" Kevin asked.

"Imprisoned, but she's already lost her mind…," Als answered.

Kevin nodded and faced the witch again. "Can you neutralize the poison?"

Tinasha met Kevin's eyes, her own looking close to tears. It was the first time anyone in the room had ever seen her like that, and the gravity of the situation struck them all anew.

"About this poison… I studied the bit on the needle. It's a natural toxin called alkakia. No antidote exists. It exists only to kill," the witch explained.

Kevin was left speechless.

The alkakia flower had reddish-brown petals. The poison of the same name was extracted from those petals.

It was a notoriously deadly substance that had been in use since the Dark Age. None had survived it.

Once he understood the situation, the former king asked, “So is he going to be asleep forever?”

“I can’t maintain this state indefinitely. While time is slowed for him, it’s not stopped completely. At some point, the poison will overtake him,” the witch explained, biting her red lip so hard it bled.

Kevin was struck silent. All he could do was gaze at his son’s pale face. “Rosalia…”

The name of his late wife fell from his lips.

Tinasha shut her eyes again. She gripped Oscar’s hand tight.

Though he was so close, he had never seemed more distant from her. Tinasha had so many things to consider, but she couldn’t focus on any of them.

Desperately, she wished for some inkling of how to proceed.

She looked up. A distortion formed in the center of the room.

A moment later, the Witch of the Forbidden Forest was standing there. Irritated, she cried, “Having Senn retrieve me was a dirty trick!”

“I’m sorry,” Tinasha apologized.

Picking up on an odd note in her friend’s voice, Lucrezia looked around the room. She took in the grave mood and everyone’s somber expression before her eyes finally landed on her friend and the man asleep in bed. Lucrezia stepped over to them and examined Oscar’s face. “What is this…? You’ve put him in suspended animation?”

“Yes.”

Lucrezia’s attention shifted to Oscar’s left hand, which Tinasha was holding. She noticed his ominously inflamed palm and scowled. “Alkakia?”

“Yes,” Tinasha affirmed, which made Lucrezia scowl even more.

“It’s hopeless. What do you hope to achieve by stopping time for him?”

This was coming from a witch who took pride in her outstanding potion-making techniques. Shock rippled through the room at her heartless statement. All stared at their king, who was facing unavoidable doom.

However, Tinasha replied blankly, “Don’t make it sound hopeless. I’m going to do something about it.”

Her response was stubborn. Lucrezia glared at her, annoyed. “How?”

“I’m going to make a blood serum.”

The answer was enough to take even Lucrezia by surprise.

There was no blood serum for alkakia.

That was common knowledge to anyone who knew the dark history of the mainland. The oil that could be extracted from the alkakia flower had been feared for hundreds of years as a deadly, incurable poison. The toxin was one of the reasons people said things like, *You can’t turn back history.*

The Witch of the Forbidden Forest frowned. “What? That poison is synonymous with death. How are you going to make a blood serum?”

“With my body. Time is stopped for me, and I have plenty of magic. I can hold the poison off for a full day. In that time, I’ll use magic to create antibodies.”

The royal protector’s declaration stunned all present. They stared at her with an array of different expressions. A tiny bit of hope began to bloom within the room.

Lucrezia’s response was markedly disparate, though. Her beautiful features transformed into a mask of rage. She sucked in a deep breath, then let loose in a shout that shook the chamber.

“Are you completely out of your mind?! It’s not a magic potion! Even if you *can* make the serum, you’ll die! You’ll be in too much pain to use magic! And if you numb the pain, your senses will be dulled…”

Her roar was deafening. Everyone except Tinasha stiffened in the face of Lucrezia’s fury. They blanched as they realized how dangerous Tinasha’s plan was.

Yet the witch herself wasn’t fazed at all. “That’s why I’m asking for your help. Also, I’m good at withstanding pain,” she said indifferently, then looked up. A keen light glinted from within the abyss in her eyes.

Lucrezia caught sight of it and flinched. “I don’t want to.”

“Please…”

“No! What’s wrong with you? Are you stupid? This is insane! Stop it right now, find another man!” Lucrezia cried.

“Please,” Tinasha repeated, showing no signs of backing down.

Open irritation flashed across Lucrezia’s face again. She took firm hold of Tinasha’s shoulders. Anger seethed in her amber eyes as she glared at the other woman.

Witch and witch stared at each other.

It was a battle of wills. Emotions that were much too overpowering passed between them.

Finally, Lucrezia asked softly, “Is this man worth risking your life?”

“He is,” Tinasha answered at once.

Her mind held nothing but confidence.

And the Witch of the Azure Moon gave a slightly pained smile.

Lucrezia let out a long sigh.

She looked up and gazed out once more around the room. Pointing at Sylvia and Pamyra, she commanded, “You two, help us out.”

They nodded right away and dashed over. Two other mages, Renart and Kav, raised their hands.

“I’ll help, too,” said Kav.

“So will I,” said Renart.

“No men,” Lucrezia stated flatly, and their eyes widened.

Tinasha got to her feet, wincing. “It’ll be all right. Just trust us.” She looked back at the bed and stroked Oscar’s cheek. After gazing at him fondly, she pressed a kiss to his forehead.

Glancing over at the bedside table, she saw the crystal globe she'd given him glittering the same color as his eyes, which were now closed to the world.

The group of lady mages moved to Tinasha's chambers, where she stripped off all her clothes.

Fully nude, she placed a chair in the center of the room and sat down on it. As she did, Lucrezia drew a magic circle on the floor surrounding it. Sylvia and Pamyra stood on opposite sides of the intricately designed array.

"This is an entirely new undertaking, so I don't know how long it will take. You might die before it's done," cautioned Lucrezia.

"Yes, because I don't have any physical endurance. I do have an overabundance of magic, though," Tinasha replied, so blithely that the blood drained from Pamyra's face. The only reason she didn't try to stop her lady there was that Oscar's life hung in the balance.

Tinasha let out a deep sigh. She was nervous. Whether or not she could save him, this would be a turning point.

Curiously, her mood was strangely calm. Maybe this was how all her challengers felt when they came to her tower.

"It *was* quite arrogant of me to declare it to be a tower of trials that could grant wishes…," she murmured.

Many people believed that nothing was impossible for the strongest witch in all the land. But beneath the surface, it was all she could do to offer her life to save one man.

Desperately, fumblingly, just like any other human would.

Yet she didn't mind.

Now Tinasha had become a challenger. She was tackling fate head-on.

Tinasha looked down at her own body and gave a wan smile. "If I knew this was going to happen, I would have worked out more."

"Some difference in muscle tone wouldn't have made a difference. The most important thing is that you don't lose your presence of mind. I've placed a barrier, but if your magic starts going wild, we'll have a difficult time handling things," said Lucrezia.

"I will bear that in mind," Tinasha replied.

With preparations complete, Lucrezia came to stand in front of Tinasha, holding the bottle containing the alkakia-poisoned needle. She frowned as she looked at Tinasha's alabaster skin, pointing to a red mark on her neck. "What is *that*?"

"Huh?" Tinasha asked, unable to see what her friend was referring to because it was in a blind spot.

Lucrezia eyed her friend with exasperation. "Well, whatever…"

Tinasha exhaled, then recited a short incantation. She anchored herself to the chair so she wouldn't move despite the pain. Once it was over, she looked up at Lucrezia. "If I die, complete the spell for me."

"Okay."

"And also erase all his memories of me."

“I will not. If you die, I’m going to make him live with that knowledge for the rest of his days,” Lucrezia answered tartly, and Tinasha winced. Her long eyelashes fluttered, and her thoughts drifted.

How did Tinasha know that she would survive this ordeal? What proof did she have that assured her this wouldn’t kill her?

The witch wasn’t looking for a place to die. She didn’t want Oscar to be the reason she perished.

Thus, it had to be all right.

She wouldn’t die.

Tinasha let out a long, deep breath.

Sound faded away.

Her consciousness was growing keen.

It had been like this when she faced off against Lanak, too. She knew she was strong in situations like this.

Hesitation was gone; now there was only unerring confidence.

“Please begin,” Tinasha stated, smiling and closing her eyes.

By force of will, she was attempting to override reality.

She had just enough power to reject fate.

And so the two witches’ trial began.

Reaching and reaching, but unable to get to the other person right away.

So you decide to shorten the distance by half.

Then by another half.

Slowly, but powered by a strong yearning, getting closer and closer.

Inching ever nearer, trying to close the stubborn distance between you two to nothing at all.

Mourning that that distance won't budge no matter how you want it to.

Perhaps this was what people called love.

※

When Oscar awoke, he found he was lying in bed, getting stared at by quite a lot of people.

Baffled, Oscar moved to sit up, and a dull ache flared in his left hand.

However, when he looked at it, there was no injury or mark there. Lazar hurried over and placed an arm around him. "Your Majesty, please don't push yourself."

"What is going on? What happened?" inquired Oscar.

"You've been very ill. We were all so worried," answered Lazar.

At that, Oscar looked around the room. True to what Lazar said, all present looked upon him with deep concern. Sylvia stood closest to the door; her eyes seemed to be red and puffy from crying. Noticing as much, Oscar frowned. "Was it really that bad? I don't remember anything…"

As he spoke, he realized that the one person who should be by his side was absent. Yet he didn't know who that was. He covered his face with one hand. "My mind's kind of a jumble."

"That's because you've just woken up," responded Lazar.

Oscar tried to recall the vivid dream he'd been having, but it hovered frustratingly out of reach.

He shook his head lightly. It didn't look like he'd be able to recover his lost memories. Lazar knelt down and examined him. "Would you like anything to eat? Or will you go back to sleep for a bit?"

"Well, I have work to do," stated Oscar.

"Your father is taking care of that."

"He is? That's rare," said Oscar. Just how sick had he been if his father, who typically never left the castle's rear wing, was taking over his duties?

Oscar racked his brain, but he couldn't remember anything from before he'd fallen asleep. There was only persistent, bone-deep fatigue. "Then I guess I'll get some more rest… Sorry."

"Please do. We'll leave you alone… If you need anything, just call for me," replied Lazar, bowing as he took his leave.

Oscar lay back down, but perhaps because he'd been out for so long, he couldn't fall back asleep. He was more bothered about his missing memories, and in the end, he sat back up in bed. "What happened…?"

He knew who he was, and who Lazar, his father, and his inner circle of advisers and attendants were.

The country of Farsas had a long and storied history; its royal sword Akashia was passed down through generations of rulers. Born the crown prince of this nation, Oscar had been cursed as a child by the Witch of Silence. But he conquered the tower of the Witch of the Azure Moon and had her break the curse. After that, there was a war with the newly emerged nation of Cuscull, yet Oscar had succeeded to the throne with no significant problems. He wasn't unhappy, nor were there any prominent unsolved problems. Of course, the young man frequently felt stifled under the weight of his duties, but that was his natural burden to bear. He couldn't share it with anyone else, and he was prepared to live out his life this way.

And yet he felt that on a personal level—he'd lost something vital.

A fuzzy sense of unease had gripped him since he'd awoken. He looked all around, trying to unearth what it might be.

Oscar's gaze landed on a small glass ball that had been placed on his bedside table at some point. For some mysterious reason, it was colored blue, and its purpose was unknown to him. A twilit sky was sealed away inside it. "What's this…?"

As he wondered when he'd acquired such a thing, Oscar got out of bed.

When he departed from his room, the guards stationed outside his door gaped at him with shock. "Your Majesty, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just going to go for a walk around the castle. I'm fine on my own," Oscar stated, but the guards eyed him with concern. Their king was still recovering, after all. Yet if he said he didn't need an escort, then they couldn't press the matter.

Oscar left them and paced down the hall on his own.

He knew this castle like the back of his hand, but it felt strangely empty and gloomy. For some reason, the blue sky beyond the windows seemed too clear. Rolling the crystal ball around in his hand, Oscar made his way down the deserted corridor.

His memories remained elusive. They were right there, but he couldn't reach them.

As that continued to nag at him, he caught sight of someone at the end of the hall and slowed his pace.

It was Norman the magistrate with a pile of papers in his arms. His eyes widened a little as he noticed his king, and then he bowed, taking care not to bump into the corner of the hallway. Oscar nodded to him and moved to pass him by…but then suddenly asked, "Norman, do you know what happened before I fell asleep?"

"Ah?" replied Norman in confusion, and Oscar snapped back to himself. Norman was someone who had worked in the castle a long time, sure, but why had Oscar asked *him* that? Why did he feel like Lazar and the others were lying to him?

“Never mind, it’s nothing,” dismissed Oscar, shaking his head and starting to walk off.

Behind him, he heard Norman calmly inquire, “Your Majesty, have you decided on a queen yet?”

“A queen?”

Why was he asking that now? Oscar turned back around.

Norman looked very serious as he continued. “It’s time for you to be thinking about your heir. You should pick out someone who meets the requirements.”

“What requirements…?”

Oscar’s head was starting to throb. The hole in his heart ached. The crystal globe in his hand felt warm.

He rubbed at his temples.

Not once had he thought about choosing a queen.

His curse had robbed him of that choice, and after the curse had been broken…he hadn’t thought about it then, either.

Oscar hadn’t forgotten about getting married. To do as much was his duty, of course.

He just simply hadn’t considered at all whom he would decide on.

“…Tinasha.”

The name slipped out naturally, stunning Oscar.

Why had he forgotten about her?

The most beloved and irreplaceable woman in his life. He wanted her with him even if he had to defy those around him.

“Oscar, don’t be reckless.”

The king looked back, feeling as if he’d heard her gentle voice. But no one was there.

A beautiful, emotional, and lonely witch.

When she was nearby, all the oppressive feelings that clung to him disappeared. No matter where he was, he could even manage to enjoy the burdens laid on his shoulders. She had the power to do that quite naturally, her spirit setting him free.

Oscar pushed his bangs away from his sweaty forehead. “How could I fail to recall her…?”

“If you’ve decided on a queen, then I am extremely delighted. However, please do not push yourself. While your treatment may be over, you are still not fully recovered,” cautioned Norman before bowing and taking his leave.

Left alone once more, Oscar held the crystal globe up before his eyes. Tinasha had used magic to create the bright night sky contained within. She’d still been with him back then.

“…Ngh.”

Oscar’s left hand suddenly twinged with pain, and he tightened his hold on the crystal. He remembered this pain. The veil over his memories suddenly blew off.

And when all the recollections that had been sealed came surging back, Oscar at last understood what was so distinctly wrong with this situation.
The king ran through the castle until he reached the witch's chamber. There was a barrier up around the door. Invisible magic charmed the entrance, concealing it.

Why was the room hidden? The mysteries were piling up. Oscar could only conclude that someone in the castle was trying to erase all traces of Tinasha from his mind. Thinking about why only led him to envision nightmare scenarios, so he shook off those thoughts and faced the barrier.

He'd left Akashia, which could easily dispel the ensorcelled door, in his room. However, he didn't want to waste time going back to get it. He stared at the finely wrought spell configuration and reached out for its vital point.

I can break this, he thought confidently.

Yet just before he could touch the bit of magic, the barrier disappeared, and the door became visible.

He pushed it open and went inside to find the Witch of the Forbidden Forest glaring at him, arms crossed in displeasure. "And here I tampered with your memories so you *wouldn't* come looking like this. What do you think you're doing? And you're trying to undo my barrier to boot! Have some self-awareness."

"Where's Tinasha?"

Lucrezia let out an intentionally loud sigh. She jerked her chin toward a spot farther in. There was his witch, lying on the bed and completely still.

As Oscar made his way toward her, he realized how terribly nervous he was.

He was afraid to ask—afraid to look—but he had to know.

He came up to the head of the bed and stared at Tinasha's face. Her ordinarily fair complexion now had a terrible pallor. Fearfully, he reached out and touched her cheek. Her smooth skin was slightly chilly.

"Is she alive?"

"I wouldn't have put her there if she were dead," Lucrezia retorted acidly, which relieved Oscar so much he felt like he could collapse.

The witch went on, sounding even more perturbed. "And here I thought she'd calm down if she got herself a man, so I encouraged her to get one, and look where it's got us. Things have only gotten worse. Why is she hovering on the edge of death? There are limits to how careless you can be with your own life. It's really beyond the pale. I'm not at all happy about this."

"Sorry," Oscar apologized without taking his eyes off Tinasha.

He should take responsibility for his own leniency.

In his naïveté, he'd spared Clara's life. He hadn't wanted to put her death on the witch.

But in the end, that decision had come back to bite not just him but Tinasha as well. This was entirely his fault.

Oscar ran his fingers through her onyx locks, which had lost a little of their luster. This was now the third time he'd stood next to her as she lay unconscious. The first had been after her battle with the demonic beast. The second had been after the war over the magical lakes. In each instance, he'd fretted over her while waiting for her to stir.

Despite her power being unrivaled, Tinasha always put herself last and took severe risks. She acted with complete disregard for her own interests, which was exactly why Oscar wanted to be the one to protect her.

Unfortunately, he'd made a mistake this time. He didn't know the details of what had happened, but it was readily apparent from Lucrezia's attitude that *he* was the reason Tinasha was lying unconscious now.

Deep regret crossed his face as he stroked her skin, seeking to reassure himself. He ran his fingers along the slim column of her neck—and noticed something strange.

Just below where the white blanket covered her, her smooth skin had turned a faint brown color.

Oscar hesitated a little, but grabbed hold of the bedcovers. From behind, he heard a quelling voice say, "Stop it."

"I want to know."

"No woman wants that to be seen. Stop it."

"But these…are injuries I caused, aren't they?"

Lucrezia didn't answer. Taking that as permission, Oscar pulled down the blanket.

Underneath, she was completely naked. He inhaled sharply.

What caught his eye wasn't her body, but the welts and blisters covering almost every inch of it.

Tinasha's bewitchingly glossy white skin was virtually unrecognizable with discoloration. All over, patches of skin had hardened into rough blotches.

It looked just like she'd been badly burned and scarred. Oscar was left speechless at the horrifying sight.

Lucrezia cut in bitterly, "The alkakia ravaged her entire body. It's astonishing that she survived at all. I thought the pain would be so unbearable that she wouldn't be able to maintain her sanity, but she managed to keep reciting the spell until the end."

"…Can you help her?" asked Oscar.

"I'm going to treat it once her magic has stabilized a bit more. I can't just yet. The backlash of using her body to create the blood serum has left her magic an utter mess," Lucrezia explained, which put the king's mind at ease, if only slightly. Gently, Oscar touched the inflamed skin around Tinasha's chest.

It felt gritty and coarse. Oscar's heart sank. However, it also filled him with incomparable fondness. Conflicting emotions swam through him. Heat swelled in his breast, nearly bringing him to tears.

If Oscar said any of this out loud, he knew Lucrezia would slap him. This was despicable; he knew that.

Still, he felt like this was proof of Tinasha’s attachment to him, the evidence he’d long been hoping for. Simultaneously he felt burning regret and dizzying contentment.

3. The Unknown

“It hasn’t disappeared completely,” Lucrezia sighed, standing behind Tinasha in the spacious bath paved with white stone.

Tinasha was sitting on a low stool as she washed her hair, and on her back was a light-brown mark roughly the size of a child’s handprint. After her magic had recovered and she woke up, the two witches had purged the traces of alkakia left on her skin. But even after they’d finished treating Tinasha’s whole body, there was one mark that refused to heal.

Lucrezia frowned at the singular blemish marring Tinasha’s milky white skin. “I’ll concoct a magic serum later to make it fade in color.”

“I really don’t mind. It’s not a spot anyone will see, after all. Thank you,” Tinasha replied.

“You need to take proper care of it! Although…I suppose this will teach the man who sees it a good lesson,” Lucrezia mused.

“Why would anyone look there? I can’t even see it myself.”

“……” Lucrezia let out a little sigh. Turning back, she sank into the deep tub.

They weren’t in the bathroom attached to Tinasha’s chambers but rather the sizable Farsas Castle baths. Steam drifted up to the high ceilings of the expansive room built of ceramic and alabaster. The soaking tub was big enough to swim in.

Typically, only royalty could use these baths; the two witches were the only ones present.

Lucrezia amused herself by making bubbles foam up in the water as she gazed at Tinasha, who was still absorbed in combing out her long black tresses in the shower area. Lucrezia said to her idly, “I’ve stuck with you this long, and you still manage to shock me.”

The Witch of the Azure Moon’s red lips quirked up as she laughed and replied, “I appreciate it.”

After her bath, Lucrezia immediately returned to her home in the forest.

Tinasha bid farewell to her friend and teleported to her bedroom, where she began to dry her long hair in front of the vanity mirror. Pamyra noticed she was back and came in to help her.

“Lady Tinasha, His Majesty would like to see you once you’re done getting ready,” she said.

“All right,” answered Tinasha, still reeling slightly with sleepiness.

Oscar had come to see her after she’d woken from her coma, but Lucrezia had shouted, “She needs rest!” and chased him out of the room. This would be their first chance since the attack on the castle to really talk.

“What do you want to wear? Lady Lucrezia left quite a few outfits,” Pamyra remarked.

“I’d be asking for trouble if I wore anything that pervert picked out,” retorted Tinasha. Pamyra gave a weak smile, and the witch sighed. If Lucrezia had sent over clothing, it was undoubtedly for the purpose of irritating Tinasha. Indeed, everything she’d picked had to be on the revealing side.

Pamyra selected a white silk gown for her lady and took pains to dress her up to match it. She combed Tinasha’s long jet-black locks out carefully, then placed a white silk flower in her hair next to her left ear. The witch’s cheeks and lips were a little pale, so Pamyra applied some light makeup to give Tinasha some color. Still feeling sluggish and languid, the witch let her do as she pleased.

Once she was ready, Tinasha teleported to outside the study door. She knocked on it and went inside.

Oscar was inside, but so were Chief Mage Kumu and several of the magistrates. They were all taken aback by the beautiful sight of her in her white gown. The king’s eyebrows rose a fraction. “What are you doing? I would’ve come to you if you’d just waited.”

“I teleported here, so it was no trouble. Am I intruding?”

“Not at all,” answered Oscar, gesturing her over. She came over to him, and he pulled her onto his lap. He checked along her exposed ivory skin to see if it was healed, then pressed a kiss to her forehead.

As the magistrates observed the king treat the witch as delicately as a fragile object, they exchanged glances with one another. They weren’t sure if they should leave the room or not. With an awkward look on his face, Kumu herded everyone out. Once Oscar and Tinasha were left alone, she gave him a put-out look. “I knew I’d be intruding.”

“It’s fine. More importantly, I’m going to have you take that off later.”

“Why?” she retorted.

“I want to make sure you’re all healed.”

“I’m all healed!” Tinasha cried, balling her hands into fists and screwing them up against his temples.

The attack didn’t seem to cause Oscar any pain; he was calm as he persisted, “It won’t hurt anything, so just let me do it.”

“It’ll hurt my mood,” the witch shot back, evading his grasp and floating up into the air.

Her response to Oscar's antics was no different than normal, which left him feeling suspicious. He hadn't thought he needed to confirm a certain point with her, but it turned out that he did.

"What am I to you?"

The classic question. Tinasha frowned and answered flatly, "We have a contract."

Oscar collapsed onto his desk.

Part of him had expected that, but a wave of exhaustion still swept over him upon his hearing it for real. It went a little past fatigue; helpless laughter bubbled up inside him.

Tinasha cast a strange look at the man slumped over on his desk and giggling to himself. She floated downward and ran her fingers through his hair. "And you're important to me."

"Oh yeah?" Oscar asked, laughing even harder.

Tinasha scowled slightly. Was some aftereffect of the poison making him loopy? The entire time she'd known him, she had never been able to tell what would set him off and make him chuckle.

"What is it…?" she asked warily.

"Nothing, it's just…I'd like you to maybe give everything a little more thought. Okay?" Oscar responded, wiping away tears and sighing with amusement as he looked up at her. The witch cocked her head in confusion.

Now that he mentioned it, there did seem to be something she needed to think about. It had seemed so important at the time, but with all the chaos and being in a coma for three days, she'd forgotten about it. As she left Oscar to his work and exited the study, she sorted through her memories, trying to think of what it could be.

When the witch dropped in on the lounge, she found the usual gang of mages was present, as were Als and Meredina.

Pamyra was there, too. Evidently, she'd invited Als and Meredina because they wanted to see Tinasha. Everyone gave the witch a warm welcome when she entered, which embarrassed her. She sank into a chair and took a sip from a cup of tea Pamyra had made for her. The first topic of discussion was the poison that had caused all the trouble.

Tinasha drew a circle in the air with her finger. "I caught a lucky break and was able to create a blood serum for alkakia… So I've asked Lucrezia to handle the analysis. If all goes well, I think we'll be able to mass-produce the serum. However, there are still only minutes between alkakia poisoning and death, so it'll be tricky to administer in other cases."

"Still, it makes a world of difference to actually have some sort of cure," insisted Kav, who specialized in potions. He looked very excited. While alkakia was difficult to obtain, the more significant trouble had been the lack of an antidote. Once the serum's existence became public, the deadly substance should fall out of use.

Suddenly recalling something, Als snapped his fingers. "That reminds me, who was the mastermind behind all this anyway? They summoned those

demonic spirits, planted Clara in the castle, and gave her the poisoned needle, didn't they? That's not your average scheme. Do you think some group is behind it?"

"Someone definitely tampered with my wards to launch the attack. They made a hole in them that I didn't even notice. Obviously, a mage is involved, but they must be frighteningly skilled. I don't suppose Clara has said anything?" Tinasha said.

"Not a word. We can't get her to talk."

The culprit behind the attack on the king had already lost her mind. Because she didn't have any information to barter for her life, it was only a matter of time before she was executed. While the king had saved her life once, in the end, she would die because of him anyway. Tinasha really wasn't sure how to feel when she thought about that.

Regardless, it was Clara's choices that had gotten her here, and these were the consequences. Tinasha didn't think Oscar needed to change anything about his way of doing things. As his protector, Tinasha was the one at fault for failing to guard him. She couldn't raise the precision on his barrier so high that it could deflect needles; that would impede his daily life. Even so, she should never have left his side during an invasion. Though relieved that things hadn't gone past the point of no return, Tinasha still felt remorse for her part in how things had transpired.

As everyone offered their opinions on the situation, the conversation strayed into a casual chat. Tinasha recalled what had just happened in the study and brought it up.

"…So I have no idea why he was laughing," the witch concluded, wrapping up her story and looking to the group for answers. Their expressions proved challenging to read. Doan and some others were doubled over on the table guffawing, just like Oscar. Pamyra was rubbing at her temples as if she felt a headache coming on.

Kav muttered, "His Majesty truly is something for laughing at that…"

Scratching at his head, Als asked Tinasha, "So you're really not aware?"

"Aware of what?" she responded.

"……"

All save the witch let out a sigh, realizing that while a cure for alkakia had been made, there was still no cure for this.

Solemnly, Renart said, "Lady Tinasha, you should do some more serious thinking, just as His Majesty said."

Her attendant's advice made the witch frown in bewilderment. "But I don't know what I should be pondering…"

"Consider all the things you've done for His Majesty. Have you gone to such lengths for past contract holders?" Renart questioned.

Tinasha cocked her head. The faces of many people she had known before came to mind. "Hmmmmmm. It depended on the situation…I think…"

"But His Majesty is a unique case, isn't he?"

“Probably… Yes, he is,” Tinasha replied, and it sounded somewhat childish.

While the witch wore an uneasy expression, the others observed her exchange with Renart bearing looks ranging from concern to amusement.

“Why is he special?” Renart pressed, hoping to get his lady to finally come to realize what her feelings meant.

“I-I’m not sure… Because I’m attached to him?”

The response immediately took the wind out of everyone’s sails. All had thought Tinasha would get it this time, but now they were back to square one. At this rate, it would take a hundred years for things to work out.

Renart, however, remained undaunted. “Are you not in love with His Majesty?”

“…What?”

Silence fell.

No one dared say a thing. The witch at the center of it all was dumbfounded.

As everyone watched her with bated breath, Tinasha suddenly leaped to her feet and started shaking Als by the neck—likely because he was sitting closest to her.

“Am I?!” she cried.

“Don’t ask me… And stop strangling me, please,” he choked out. While the witch’s grip wasn’t firm, it still hurt.

She released her hold on his neck, only to grab his shoulders and rock the poor man that way. “But we have an age gap of over four hundred years!”

“I don’t think witches need to worry about age gaps…,” Als murmured.

Magic began to leak from Tinasha, causing the glass panes to rattle in the windows. Doan, who was sitting with his back to them, ducked down.

How could she be so clueless after all the time Oscar had spent making very obvious advances on her *and* after she’d risked her life for him with no hesitation?

Without saying it aloud, everyone thought some variation of It seems that enduring four hundred years robs you of many things.

Discreetly, the mages erected barriers to protect against the growing storm forming in the lounge with Tinasha as its eye.

“Me? Love him?” the witch muttered to herself in total shock.

A magical wind was starting to whip through the room. Kav hurried to gather up all the books lying open on the desks and tables. Doan extended his barrier to envelop Als and Meredina.

The gale grew mightier with each moment. Unfortunately, the source of the gusts was in such a state of bewilderment that she wasn’t aware. She stood in the center of the storm, staring down at her hands. “I didn’t think I could feel that way about anyone…”

“I think you do, though…,” interjected Sylvia hesitantly.

At her wit's end, the witch looked to the others and asked, "Would you mind if we put this to a vote?"

"I don't know why it's come to that, but go ahead…," replied Sylvia.

"Who thinks I love Oscar?" the witch inquired, sounding almost too easygoing about it.

All present exchanged glances before sheepishly raising their hands.

The witch's jaw dropped. "Wh-what in the world?!"

Very shortly after, there was a loud shattering sound.

Lucrezia was finally relaxing after arriving home when her friend blew in like a hurricane. The Witch of the Forbidden Forest arched an eyebrow.

Tinasha's hair was all in disarray, and Lucrezia eyed her dubiously. "Did something happen?"

"No, nothing major. I'm just going to make us dinner, if that's okay?" answered Tinasha.

"Sure… But first, brew some tea. And change those clothes," Lucrezia instructed, pointing to the white gown that was not at all suited to housework.

Tinasha shrugged, unbothered. Even if she'd had the time to put something else on, she wasn't in the state of mind to consider that. She borrowed a short black dress from Lucrezia. However, the two witches' taste in attire was quite different, and Tinasha's legs were quite exposed in this outfit. Still, it was easy to move around in, so she decided not to fuss over it.

Tinasha made dinner, and the pair sat across from each other at the dining table just like old times. Bit by bit, Lucrezia drew the story of what had happened out of Tinasha. When the meal was finished, she looked utterly exasperated. "I can't believe you… You've been incredibly slow to notice. Maybe the last person."

"Really?"

"Yes," Lucrezia stated bluntly, taking a sip of tea so she wouldn't sigh.

Across the table, Tinasha was moaning with a dismayed look on her face. Lucrezia rested her chin in her hands, losing heart at how Tinasha looked exactly as she did when facing a particularly difficult-to-parse spell configuration.

Ever since Tinasha and Oscar had formed their contract, Lucrezia had felt like she always had to find some excuse to poke her nose into the younger witch's business.

Wasn't this visit, then, proof that the situation genuinely rattled Tinasha? Up until now, she had handled everything with perfect aplomb, solving any issue all on her own—excepting the century before she started living in her tower, of course.

Lucrezia eyed her friend, who looked to be on the precipice of diving into a maze of her own thoughts. She set down her teacup and placed one red-painted finger at Tinasha's forehead.

“I don’t understand how you’ve thought it over so many times without knowing for sure. How about you just be honest with yourself? You’ve loved him for a very long time now.”

“Why?!” Tinasha exclaimed.

“Don’t turn that on me. I’m the one who wants to ask you—how is it that you aren’t aware? Oh, I’m so sick of spirit sorcerers. This is what happens when you’re laced up too tight for over four hundred years.”

“I don’t want to hear that from a pervert like you!” retorted Tinasha.

“You’re the only one who’s always calling me a pervert!” snapped Lucrezia.

They sounded like squabbling children.

Tinasha realized she was losing her temper and took some deep breaths. She slumped over the table, then looked up at Lucrezia just like she had when she was in her teenager’s body. “I guess you might be right…”

“I do think that’s what it is,” Lucrezia said primly.

“Urgh…,” Tinasha moaned, entirely at a loss. She didn’t understand a thing no matter how much thought she gave it. She couldn’t get a solid grasp on it.

Lucrezia told Tinasha to be honest with herself, but Tinasha was afraid that she would change if she acknowledged those feelings.

Again, her thoughts turned to Oscar. His incredibly arresting eyes flashed in her mind’s eye. Unconsciously, she murmured, “…The only thing I can do is kill him.”

“Why has it come to that?! Are you completely out of your mind?” Lucrezia shouted, slapping the table at her friend’s insane methodology. Then she sagged down, feeling totally drained.

※

After finishing his work for the day, Oscar tracked down Pamyra and asked where Tinasha was. The servant was evasive, only answering, “I think she’ll visit you soon,” with a wincing smile.

In any case, the witch didn’t appear to be in the castle. Instead, Oscar received a report that a table in the lounge had split in two, and Tinasha would be paying for its replacement.

“What does she think she’s doing…?”

She’d probably smashed the piece of furniture on some whim, and that also likely had something to do with why she was out of the castle. Oscar returned to his room and thought back on the conversation they’d had in his study as he changed clothes.

Tinasha was so unpredictable and difficult to read that it was highly entertaining. It was a good thing that Oscar never tired of watching her.

Chuckling to himself, he looked out the window and saw that it was already pitch-black outside. Witch or not, Tinasha was still recovering, and Oscar worried over whether she’d return by the day’s end.

Thankfully, his concerns were unwarranted, as Tinasha teleported directly into his bedroom without knocking on the window.

Oscar was taken aback by the odd urgency of her actions, but she either didn't notice this or paid it no heed as she zoomed over to him in midair and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Oscar, can I talk to you?!"

"Whoa. What's going on?"

"I thought about it and thought about it but really don't understand. Earlier, I asked everyone's opinions, and I've decided to go with the majority vote!" Tinasha stated hurriedly.

"What are you on about?" Oscar demanded. He had no idea what she was saying. This went beyond her usual esoteric behavior. It was outright incomprehensible.

Feeling a headache coming on, Oscar set the witch down on the floor and left her there. He went to sit down on his bed and heaved a fatigued sigh. "Well?" he asked, prompting her to go on.

"Am I in love with you?!" she exclaimed.

"…Even the way you break down is ridiculous."

Tinasha stared at Oscar, truly at the end of her rope.

She felt like, all day long, she'd astonished and appalled everyone she spoke to. Was it really that obvious?

He is special to me.

That much was self-evident.

Yet Tinasha didn't feel at all confident about giving a name to that feeling.

This was an emotion she'd never experienced in all her years.

There was an unquestionable heat in the depths of her body and soul.

It was like a pool of warm water—something flickering like a flame that would never go out.

Left unable to define it, Tinasha wished desperately to give it a name.

Oscar stared at the witch and beheld the earnest intensity of her gaze. A rueful smile tugged at his lips. He blinked slowly and then turned it into a proper grin. "Yes. It's about time you realized it, don't you think?"

He held out a hand to her.

She was looking at him with those clear, beautiful eyes, just as she had when they first met.

"Come here," he invited, low and gentle, and she took one hesitant step forward.

Tinasha approached carefully, step by step, until she was in his arms.

There was something both childish and mature about her all at the same time. Gazing up at her, Oscar brushed the tips of his thumbs along her cheeks. "Why are you crying?"

Tears, like tiny crystals, spilled from the ebon of Tinasha's eyes.

The warm droplets clung to her long dark eyelashes before dripping onto Oscar's hands.

Now that he pointed it out, Tinasha realized she was indeed crying.

The warmth in her heart had turned into tears and fell onto his hands.

I've finally found my way here.

It had taken so long, but perhaps it was over now.

Tinasha took Oscar's face between her hands. She stared into his blue eyes, which were trained right on her.

These were the eyes of the man who was more precious to her than anything. Her voice came out in a shaky whisper. "I can't comprehend it at all… But…I'm so glad I met you."

After that, she had no more words.

The witch now knew what the emotion she couldn't name was.

Oscar listened intently, feeling Tinasha's words seep down deep into him, and tenderly wiped away her tears.

"I'm very honored," he replied, as any ordinary young man would've, and he broke into a happy smile.

※

She didn't want to go mad. She'd had enough of madness brought on by strong emotions.

Love and hate weren't needed. Attachments were pointless.

All she had to do was look at everything as if it were a world very far away from her. As if she were the only odd creature out. There was no need to get involved with anyone, she wouldn't get too close, and she'd never change.

That's the way things had forever been.

However, there was no longer any need to walk through the centuries.

She was at her destination.

※

When Oscar awoke, it was already past sunup.

This was rare for him, as he was someone who rose with the dawn. Oscar sat up in bed and looked over to see his witch sleeping peacefully next to him.

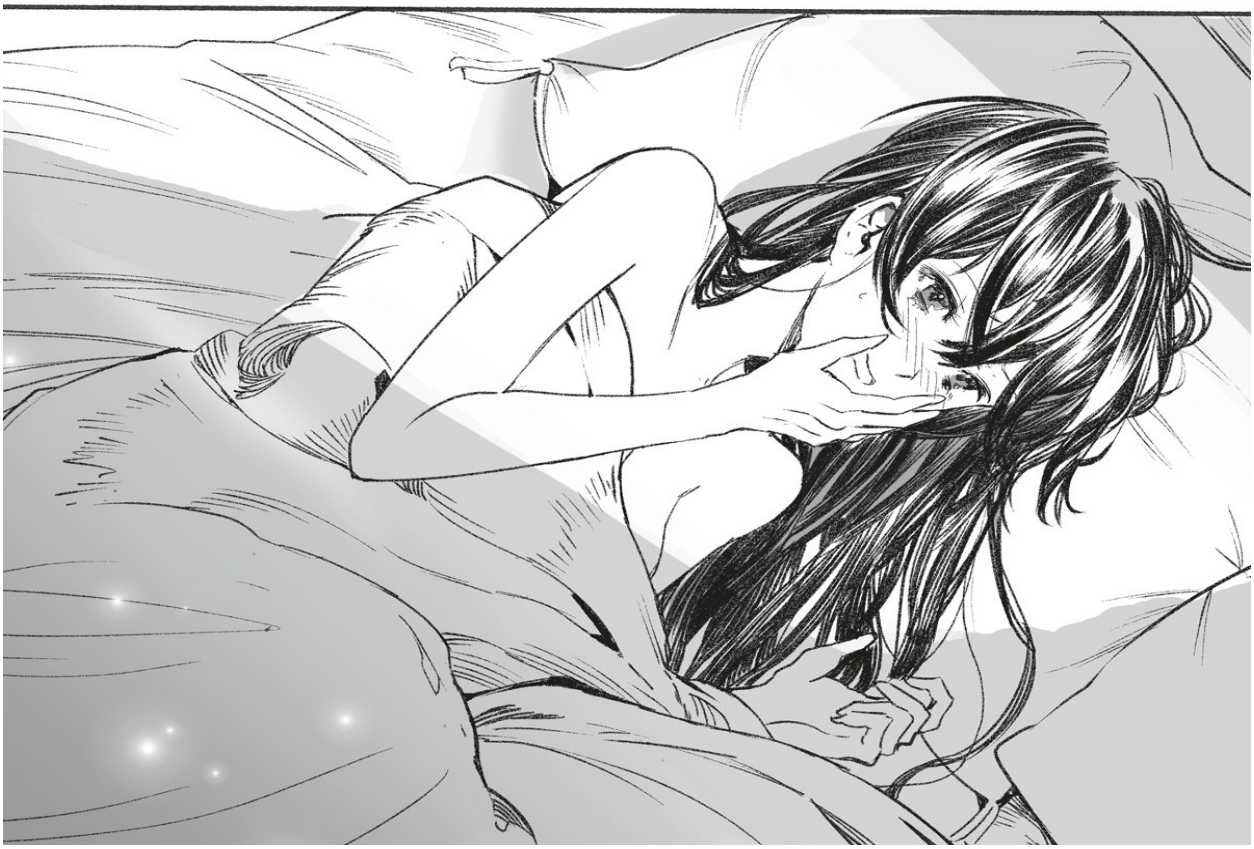
As he softly ruffled her hair, he remembered the mark the poison had left on her body. He could almost see the look of *See what you did?* on Lucrezia's face.

That blemish was a warning for him.

Oscar knew that every time he saw the thing, it would needle at him like a thorn caught in a wound. Holding on to that pain would be part of his life with her.

Tinasha must have felt his petting because she blinked her bleary eyes open. She gazed at him sleepily.

"Morning," he said.



“Mmm…,” she groaned, giving a little shake of her head. Her long eyelashes almost shut again.

Oscar stared as she tried to curl up like a cat. “You really do have a hard time getting out of bed. I knew it.”

Back when they had shared a room in the fortress, Tinasha had been a late riser, though circumstances had left her completely exhausted. Still, it was very possible that the witch was actually not a morning person and had just pretended to be high functioning in front of him up until now.

Tinasha rubbed at her eyes over and over again. Holding a hand up, she stared at the ceiling, then glanced over to see who was next to her. “Good… morning…?”

Her voice sounded incredibly drowsy. Oscar couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

His laughter brought her back to full consciousness little by little, until she finally grasped what was occurring. She brought one hand up to cover her reddening face.

“What’s the matter?” Oscar teased, an evil smirk on his face. When she saw it, she frowned. The drowsiness faded from her dark orbs, and they flashed with intelligence again.

She sat up gracefully, tugging the blanket over to conceal herself. With one hand, she reached out to caress Oscar’s cheek while she pressed a kiss to his lips. Then she pulled back, blinked once, and gave him a smile so radiant it threatened to melt his soul.

“I love you,” she whispered in a clear voice, and Oscar beamed and clutched her tight.

※

“It’s hard to cast spells…,” Tinasha sighed, looking down at the configuration in her palms. She was back in the lounge where just yesterday, she’d split a table in two. While she had replaced the piece of furniture she’d destroyed, the best course of action would’ve been not to obliterate anything in the first place. That was why she was taking the initiative to set up a barrier in the lounge, but she was tripping over a very predictable obstacle.

The usual group of mages was gathered at the new table. Doan sat closest to her, and he asked, “Miss Tinasha, what’s the matter?”

“Ah, nothing… I’ve just run into something.”

She could draw up the framework of the spell just as before, but she now needed much more magic to activate it. She might have to adjust the framework itself.

Tinasha cast a few spells that didn’t use spiritual magic and examined them in her palm. She could use these just as she had before, but if she was going to adjust her spells, she might as well change them altogether. The

witch wasn’t at all averse to creativity or hard work. She’d made great use of both countless times in the past.

Pulling herself together, Tinasha drew up a new barrier spell. “This should do for now. I guess I’ll fine-tune it up to the fifth sequence later.”

“Are you changing the basic configuration of the spell?” asked Pamyra, also a spirit sorcerer, with some confusion.

The witch nodded. “If I don’t rearrange it from the bottom up, I have a feeling it’ll mean trouble later.”

“…Got it. So that’s what happens now that you’re no longer a spirit sorcerer,” remarked the king, who shouldn’t have been in the room at all.

“Oscar?!” yelped Tinasha in what was practically a shriek.

Oscar, who had just happened to be passing by with Lazar in tow, took in everyone’s gaze and burst out laughing. “Don’t let it get to you. I don’t mind if you can’t use magic anymore.”

“I can use it just fine! I just need to use a little extra!” she snapped back.

“I’ll take full responsibility and protect you for my entire life,” he said without hesitation.

“I am *your* protector! And don’t say all that in front of other people, dummy!” Tinasha spat back, having lost her temper.

Laughing, Oscar took her into his arms. He dropped a kiss on her forehead, and she puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. Then, abruptly, the furrows in her brow cleared away, and she smiled wide with joy.

4. A Child with an Open Mind

A tranquility as deep as the sea permeated the spacious bedroom.

The moonlight pouring in from the windows shone on the woman's long black hair, lending it a dazzling sheen. Strands as fine as silk threads spilled over the edge of the bed, revealing the nape of her neck and her back as she lay facedown in bed. The ivory skin there shimmered in the dim illumination.

However, despite the expanse of alabaster skin on display, the moment didn't feel sensual. Instead, her bare skin gave off an overall cool and clear impression. Oscar watched her steadily.

Tinasha was lying on top of the sheets next to him, propped up on her elbows as she created and dispersed countless magic spells in her palms.

The man watched with keen interest. "It really does look like it's harder for you now."

"I now need quite a bit more power to cast spiritual spells. An ordinary spirit sorcerer would no longer be able to use magic after that. It's a perfect opportunity to refresh my configurations. I'd lose my touch if I didn't do so from time to time anyway."

Ten months had passed since the contract was formed. Tinasha and Oscar had just spent their first week as lovers. Spirit sorcerers were unable to cast once their chastity was lost; even the most powerful witch was not immune to that.

However, Tinasha possessed so much natural power that it put her in an entirely different league. She also had a good command of magic other than spiritual magic. Because of that, this change looked like it would amount to nothing more than an opportunity for her to do a little review of her skills. Whenever she could find the time, she worked on adjusting her spells.

As Oscar watched her concentrating intently on a configuration, he reached out to trace a line down her back. Tinasha twitched in ticklishness and jerked away to avoid it. Oscar caught up a lock of long black hair, twirled it around his fingers, and tugged the witch close. "When should we hold the ceremony?"

“What ceremony?” she asked, tilting her head to look at him. The ebon of her eyes was a much deeper black than anything in the room.

Oscar came closer and pressed a kiss to one of her eyelids. “Our wedding. Once we sign the marriage contract, you’ll have all the rights of the Farsas royal family.”

Her reaction was nothing like what Oscar had anticipated it might be. She gaped at him in shock, eyes wide as if reminded of something she’d utterly forgotten about.

Oscar frowned. He had a bad feeling about this. “What’s with that face…?”

“Ah, er…,” she stammered, dismissing the spell in her hands. She clutched her head in her hands on the bed for a bit before she finally popped her head up. Very hesitantly, she admitted, “I’m not sure about getting married…”

“What did you say?”

“Ouch!” she cried out as Oscar rubbed his fists against her temples. She clutched at her head again, and Oscar pulled her into his arms.

He glared at her beautiful face from up close. “What do you mean by that? Are you trying to start a fight?”

“I’m really not, but… Marriage is a separate issue. You should pick someone else to be your queen and have her bear your children.”

“Because you’re a witch?”

“There’s that, too, but that’s not all it is… Well, there’s a lot of things,” she admitted awkwardly before closing her eyes.

All of a sudden, Tinasha seemed very closed. Looking at her like that, Oscar hugged her tight in his arms. “You’d better not be thinking of erasing my memories once the contract is over.”

“…I’m not,” the witch answered, averting her gaze like a child trying to evade a scolding.

It did look like Oscar wasn’t far off the mark, however, and he frowned. Lucrezia had recently tampered with his memories, but that had been a very makeshift spell, never meant to last. Oscar could recall only a tiny bit of discomfort. If Tinasha used her full powers to conceal his memories, he doubted he’d ever regain them.

Refusing to let his concern show on his face, Oscar instead simply cautioned, “Listen up. Don’t go rogue and do something like that. No erasing memories or disappearing. I’m not going to do anything that would make you worry, so don’t go making any arbitrary decisions.”

“Oscar.”

“Whatever it is, let me take half of it.”

No matter what happened, if she trusted him to handle some of it, he felt confident that they could work something out in the end. They’d gotten this far doing as much, after all.

Tinasha met his eyes, then explained sulkily, “You don’t have to worry. I know that if I did that, you’d fly into a mad rage.”

“I’m glad to see you understand,” Oscar retorted breezily. Truthfully, he was deeply relieved. Knowing that losing her and being completely unaware of it wasn’t a possibility anymore felt like a weight off his shoulders.

Yet while that was one fewer thing to fret over, he still didn’t want to concede this point. “First of all, it would be going much too far to set up some other woman as a placeholder queen. I’d feel terrible for her.”

“Isn’t that what royal marriages are like? You’re prepared to marry someone as long as they come from a family of high social standing. At least, that’s how it was for me.”

What Tinasha said hinted at a political marriage, and Oscar’s face darkened.

Naturally, Oscar was intimately familiar with limited choice when it came to whom he wed.

He had grown up beneath the constant pressure of a curse fated to kill his wife and child. The man hadn’t dared to harbor a single hope regarding love and marriage.

Things were different now, though.

Farsas hadn’t done political unions ever since the reign of Oscar’s great-grandfather Regius. The nation was strong and stable enough to get by without relying on such measures.

Oscar had heard that his father had also overcome his parents’ well-founded objections and had made a commoner his queen. Oscar was prepared to make a political marriage if he needed to, but he couldn’t accept Tinasha refusing to marry him without knowing why.

It was true that witches had long been shunned, historically speaking.

If Oscar announced that he was making her queen, it would undoubtedly stir up hostile sentiments in Farsas. Other nations were unlikely to take the news well, either, and would heighten their vigilance against Farsas once it owned the most powerful witch.

Yet even if some discord arose, Oscar trusted himself to weather it.

Tinasha’s current reputation within the castle was far different from when she had first arrived, mainly because so many people had gotten to know her personally.

As for foreign opposition, Oscar had no desire to use the witch’s power against other countries. At most, it would be only for defense.

All told, Oscar believed that Tinasha’s status would not be a grave impediment, even if things took some time to settle. As someone raised to potentially become the queen of Tuldarr, she would adapt much better to the position than a commoner who would have to be educated from the ground up. So what was the problem?

As Oscar’s thoughts went round and round, Tinasha covered her mouth and let out a little yawn, perhaps to signal that she had nothing more to say. Her eyelids seemed heavy, as her long eyelashes fluttered over and over.

“I’m perfectly fine as your paramour,” she admitted.

“I don’t have any intention of keeping you in the shadows,” Oscar insisted.

“Isn’t what’s considered in the shadows or light all up to the people involved? Don’t be greedy,” the witch retorted, closing her eyes as if she couldn’t stave off sleep any longer. Even so, she made an effort to open her eyes once to look at him.

Upon seeing that she was so drowsy, Oscar smiled wanly. “It’s fine. Rest.”

“…Okay.”

His sleepyhead sweetheart passed out abruptly. As soon as her eyes shut, he could hear her breathing turn deep and even.

Once Oscar confirmed she was unconscious, he closed his eyes, too.

“Don’t be greedy.”

Tinasha’s words applied to herself as much as Oscar. He’d longed for her to feel an attachment to him, and while now she finally did, he wanted to have her by his side in public as well as in private. That was undoubtedly a form of avarice.

While Oscar understood that, he didn’t intend to compromise on this point. He couldn’t conceive of marrying some other woman. If Tinasha insisted on refusing to become his wife, he wanted to at least know the reason.

Ending his pondering there, Oscar followed the woman in his arms into sleep.

It didn’t matter if they had different dreams, because when he woke up, she would be right there next to him.

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“You said no to marrying him?!” Pamyra shrieked before clamping a hand over her mouth.

Her lady didn’t scold her for the outburst, instead only grimacing. As Pamyra helped Tinasha change her clothes, she apologized for her rudeness and pressed, “Um, may I ask why not?”

“It’s very simple. It’s because I’m a witch,” answered Tinasha as she flicked one hand.

Oscar wasn’t hiding that she was the king’s protector *and* paramour; in fact, he was broadcasting it openly. It was common knowledge within the castle that he’d always wanted to marry her, but she had never taken that to heart.

Pamyra had often fretted over how clueless her lady could be about her own feelings despite caring so much for Oscar. Now that Tinasha had finally realized the nature of her attachment, she exuded a calm and relaxed aura that greatly relieved Pamyra.

Unfortunately, though Pamyra had been anticipating her lady’s wedding, she was met with a mighty disappointment. There was no way Pamyra was

going to take this lying down. “I don’t think you being a witch matters at all. Plus, you have the veil from your parents and everything.”

The snow-white veil was perched on a rattan stand in a corner of Tinasha’s bedroom. It was so long that it trailed onto the floor. Charmed not to decay, it had been sent to Tinasha by her birth parents more than four hundred years ago and had been kept in the Tuldarr treasure vault until very recently.

At Pamyra’s words, Tinasha glanced at the veil. She gave a slightly pained smile. “Pamyra, do you know how witches are born?”

The servant paused in her combing out of Tinasha’s long black hair. “Didn’t Renart ask you a similar question? And you told him that men’s minds and bodies couldn’t survive for centuries.”

“That’s the reason there are no male witches. I’m talking about what causes witches to occur in the first place.”

“‘O-occur’?” Pamyra repeated. Why was Tinasha talking about her own kind like they were some sort of phenomenon? After considering this for a while, Pamyra failed to arrive at an answer.

She knew that her lady had become a witch because she had absorbed an enormous amount of magical power when her country was destroyed, but she couldn’t hazard a guess about the other witches.

Tinasha smiled, sensing that Pamyra was entirely perplexed. “It’s simple. All five currently living witches became such later in life. Some are like me, and others used contracts to boost their power. However, all began as humans and became witches later.”

“I see…,” Pamyra responded, impressed. She couldn’t begin to imagine the origins of these mighty immortals. Even her lady’s friend, Lucrezia, was mostly an unknown.

As Tinasha fastened up the buttons on her sleeves, her eyes narrowed as her thoughts turned distant. “No witch has ever been born. No mother could bear a child with that much power. That’s why…I can’t marry him.”

Tinasha gave a little smile.

Pamyra was still having difficulty divining her lady’s meaning, only feeling more in the dark now.

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On the wall close to the seminar rooms, an array of notices had been posted up again.

The tasks requested of the court mages ranged in difficulty as well as in nature. Tinasha came once every three days to check on them, and this time she stood gazing at them with her attendant, the mage Renart.

Prior to his arrival in Farsas, Renart had been an unaffiliated magic user. Now that he had become a court mage, he spent a lot of time on his own research.

While he was a very talented mage by nature, circumstances had left him trained only for war. For someone like him, coming to Farsas, where he could make use of his time and the mage facilities as he liked after completing his tasks, was like discovering a whole new world.

Renart tore off a request for the brewing of a magic potion. The witch looked at it and smiled. “You, making a magic potion? That’s unusual.”

“I’m trying to be as well rounded as I can,” Renart answered seriously, and Tinasha’s smile widened as she plucked off a different request—one that had just been posted. She usually took only the ones that no one else would touch. Renart gave her a quizzical look. “What job is that?”

At the inquiry, Tinasha showed him the slip. On it was written, “My supply of butterfly bloodstones is running low, so I’d like you to acquire any you come across and set them aside for me.”

“Butterfly bloodstones? I’ve never heard of those before,” Renart remarked.

“A long time ago, they were all over the place. There was once something called a bloodred butterfly. Don’t let the name fool you, though—it wasn’t a living thing. It was a phenomenon that occurred when the boundary between the magical realm and the human realm grew too close.”

“Too close?”

Tinasha snapped her fingers, and a crimson butterfly appeared in the air, unfurling its large, elegant wings. While it was undeniably beautiful, there was something ominous about it. Renart hadn’t yet recovered from his surprise when the thing winked out of sight.

“These typically form when many people are sacrificed for a forbidden curse. Excessive muddling of magic and human life force causes them to gush up out of nowhere and then disappear after a time. When they vanish, they leave behind little stones of the same color. Those pebbles can be used as catalysts. Each one contains magic and human life force, so their potential is quite broad.”

“So something like that exists…,” he mused.

“Nowadays, you almost never see them. They’re honestly something that should just disappear, considering their origins. There used to be a lot more in the Dark Age, but I’d expect that they’re quite rare these days, seeing as they vanish after use.”

Tinasha took the request notice she’d torn off and folded it up neatly. “Instead of butterfly bloodstones, I’ll create catalysts that can be stockpiled. Procure some crystals. Anything will do, even tiny fragments. We just need a lot of them.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Renart.

“What else do we have here?” Tinasha said, standing up on her tiptoes to closely examine the notice board. The ladies-in-waiting and mages passing by smiled to see her looking so innocent, considering her status as the strongest witch in the land as well as their king’s favorite.

Just then, the magistrate Norman came by with a stack of papers in hand. He caught sight of Tinasha and frowned. “What are you doing?” he demanded, his voice dripping with disapproval.

“Oh,” Tinasha said with surprise.

Renart narrowed his eyes a fraction; he must have heard about what had happened the other day from Pamyra.

However, Tinasha gave the magistrate an easy smile and answered, “I’m looking for some requests to fill. I have a bit of time on my hands.”

“Your role is not to perform odd jobs around the castle. It is to give birth to an heir.”

“……”

The witch had not expected him to lecture her on that, and her black eyes widened. Yet Norman paid her no mind and went on in a matter-of-fact tone. “You don’t need to coddle the mages. If there’s anything they can’t handle, you should teach them how to do it instead of just handling it yourself.”

After saying his piece, the man promptly took his leave. Too taken aback to respond, Tinasha scratched at her temple as she watched Norman huff out of sight. “I’m not trying to coddle them…,” she muttered.

Renart gave an uneasy smile. “He does have a point. This is why we’re working in the castle, after all. You should prioritize the things that only you can do.”

“The things only I can do, hmm?” Tinasha parroted.

She supposed that meant siring a child with the king, just as Norman had said.

That would be a perfectly natural thing for an ordinary woman to do, but Tinasha was a witch, which complicated the situation—and this involved Oscar, muddling things even further. When she first met him, she had warned him that it wasn’t a good idea to introduce a witch’s blood into the royal bloodline.

Crossing her arms, she let out a low groan. “It feels like even though I broke the curse, I’ve come right back to where I started…”

“You haven’t come back to anything. You’re making good progress.”

“Why does Oscar want me when he could have anyone he wanted?”

“Are you really asking that now…?” Renart replied, sounding vaguely exhausted.

Tinasha pursed her lips. She didn’t want to impose on her servant with any more of her personal troubles.

Renart pointed down the hallway. “You should go ask His Majesty about that directly.”

Oscar just happened to be passing by at the end of the corridor. When Tinasha saw him, she gave a little hop. He spotted her, too, beckoning her over with a smile. Without taking her eyes off him, Tinasha murmured to Renart, “Take care of the crystals.”

“Leave it to me,” he answered, and then Tinasha was off running down the hallway.

Renart watched calmly as his lady nestled up to the king and smiled happily at him.

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The year was drawing to a close.

Farsas’s final days of the year were characterized by a flurry of activity, and things inside the castle were no different. The magistrates had finished compiling all the necessary documents and preparing for the New Year festival.

“What will you do on the day of the New Year?” the witch asked the king as she brewed tea in his study.

While reviewing official papers, Oscar gave a succinct answer. “I’m going to the eastern temple to do a simple ceremony, then back to the city to greet the people from the castle.”

The place Oscar referred to resided in the grasslands beyond the city. By horseback, the trip was no longer than thirty minutes. Save for the temple itself, the location was rather uninteresting.

Multiple gods were enshrined and worshipped at the site, including Aetea. It was a place for people to pray for victory in wartime, but it was used only for New Year’s rites nowadays.

The witch inclined her head thoughtfully. “Will you use a transportation array?”

“No, I’ll ride. The trip is a processional for the public.”

“Ooh…,” Tinasha said, racking her brain to think how she could guarantee his safety. She wasn’t afraid of a head-on attack by magic or sword. He could fend off something like that on his own easily, and he had his protective barrier. But someone who wanted to commit regicide would use a more premeditated, underhanded method. When she thought of how a poisoned needle had nearly killed him amid the chaos of a demonic spirit attack a few weeks ago, it struck her that she needed to make her defense airtight.

After spending some time pondering it, Tinasha snapped her fingers. “Can I set up a spell around the temple and the road there in advance?”

“I don’t mind. Actually, please do. Sorry for the trouble.”

“It won’t be much trouble at all,” the witch said with a smile, taking the papers that detailed the plans for the ceremony from Oscar. She scanned them at lightning speed. Just as she was debating whether to have a copy made, a voice that none save the witch herself could hear called out.

“What is it, Litola?”

As Oscar looked up, the familiar in charge of managing Tinasha’s tower appeared. Litola, who took the form of an androgynous child, bowed to their

master before saying in an emotionless voice, “Visitors have come to the tower.”

“Shouldn’t it be closed?” she responded.

“It is, but some children have come.”

“Huh?”

“Five boys—none over the age of ten. Judging by their conversation, they live in the Farsas castle city.”

“What?” Tinasha said. It took an adult about a day of riding at full speed to reach the witch’s tower from here. While there were small settlements along the way, none were very close to Tinasha’s spire. The land was all flat, so it was easier than going eastward, but it was still not a short trip at all. Oscar and Tinasha exchanged glances.

“I wonder how I should deal with this. It’s already so late in the day that the children will have trouble getting back to the city before dark…,” remarked the witch, crossing her arms as a frown marred her lovely features. “What do those kids think they’re doing? Farsasian citizens are as reckless as their king.”

“Don’t take advantage of the chaos to slip some snide remarks in,” Oscar shot back. Tinasha ignored the quip as she set the papers back down on the desk.

“Perhaps they’ve been tasked with something important. I’m going to go take a look,” Tinasha decided.

“Be careful,” warned Oscar.

The familiar disappeared first—followed by Tinasha.

According to the legends, those who climbed to the top of the azure tower in the wilderness that belonged to no kingdom would have their wish granted by a witch.

But it was just as well known that the spire was packed full of demonic spirits and traps, and most challengers who went to test their skills never returned from the place. As a result, the structure had seen very few visitors in the last one hundred years.

That was what most believed anyway. The truth of it was that many made the trip, but all who failed had their memories of the tower altered and were forcibly teleported somewhere. Because of this, information about the spire remained muddled. However, some extremely rare challengers resisted the magical changes to their minds and the teleportation. These were people who had come to the tower not as a test of their skills but to have a vital wish granted.

One had wanted to recover a child abducted by a demonic spirit.

Another had sought the cure for a deathly ill relative.

Both had exhausted all other means possible in pursuit of their goals. Refusing to quit, they had ventured to the spire prepared to give their own lives.

In those cases, Tinasha had done all she could to help, even though they hadn’t defeated her challenges.

When Tinasha became a witch, she decided that the problems of the world weren't her responsibility. While she was the strongest of her kind, she was not omnipotent. Yet when people came to her to beg for assistance, she still felt compelled to do what she could.

She granted their wishes in exchange for total silence.

Those deeds had remained buried in history, never to see the light of day.

"Open it up already, you baby."

"But it won't open…," the redheaded boy protested in confusion, feeling all around the outer wall of the tower as the other four boys jeered at him. There was a break in the wall that looked like it might be an entrance, but it didn't budge when pushed, and there was no handle to pull.

Despite that, the others behind him mocked him for being a coward. The redheaded child finally had enough and whirled around in anger. "Then why don't you try?"

"Why should we?" one retorted.

"You're the one who needed to come, Saye," appended another.

They all made faces and wouldn't come any closer.

Who's the real *baby here?* thought Saye. Since the tower had proved impenetrable, he knew it would be better to give up and go home. However, he'd be mercilessly teased if he did so, and it would be a waste of the effort the kids had gone through to sneak away from home in the middle of the night.

Saye tried one more time, pushing as hard as he possibly could.

But just then, a young woman's voice cried out sharply from behind them. "Hey!"

"Eek!" he yelped, wheeling around to see a beautiful woman of about twenty standing there with her arms crossed.

Her onyx-black hair, porcelain-white skin, and dark eyes weren't features one saw all that often in Farsas. She glared at the five of them, ill tempered. "What do you boys think you're doing all the way out here?"

Saye was gazing admiringly at her until the question snapped him back to reality. "Where did you even come from…?"

"Does it matter? What business do you have with the witch?" she demanded.

"Well…"

Once Saye began to talk to the woman who'd appeared out of thin air, the other four recovered from their shock. Determinedly, each started to tell on him.

"Saye said that in the north, ice falls from the sky instead of rain."

"It's just a bunch of lies. There's no way that's true."

"So we told him to go ask the witch."

Tinasha looked puzzled when she heard the boys' claims. "Ice… Do you mean hail? No—snow?"

Saye's eyes lit up. "Yeah, that! Do you know it?"

“Yes, I do,” she answered.

Farsas was located deep inland, and its year-round temperate climate meant that it never grew cold enough for water to freeze. There were no tall mountains in the region, either, so those who lived in the castle city wouldn’t have seen snow. Some went their whole lives never seeing the ocean. It was entirely reasonable that children doubted the mere existence of snow.

Saye was delighted to hear her say that. He turned back to his friends and puffed out his chest proudly. “See? I told you! Even our parents said it’s real. Just believe me already!”

“We don’t know it’s true just because grown-ups said so!” they protested.

Feeling a keen wave of exhaustion sweep over her at this dispute that had come to a standstill, Tinasha heaved a deep sigh. “I almost don’t want to ask…but is this the reason you’ve come here?”

“Yeah,” they all chorused together.

Tinasha rubbed her forehead. But because she was dealing with children, she had to be even more careful. After placing her hands on her hips and sucking in a deep breath, she unloaded on them. “A pack of kids coming out to a place like this all alone! What if the witch killed you? What if you ran into demonic spirits or bandits along the way? You can’t get carried away and forget what you are!”

Four of them shrank back, abashed in the face of the woman’s anger. Saye didn’t back down, however. “I know it’s dangerous! But sometimes you just can’t give in! His Majesty went adventuring all over and got stronger, didn’t he?”

“So this is all *his* influence?!” Tinasha exclaimed.

Unbelievable. She really couldn’t understand the apparent male need for adventure.

But even Oscar wouldn’t have come all the way out to the witch’s tower as a child without as much as a sword to defend himself with.

Restraining her utter exasperation, Tinasha bent down until she was at eye level with Saye. “Listen to me. His Majesty didn’t get strong because he went out on adventures. He spent a long time training first. Acting recklessly is no way to get more powerful. It would be best if you had good judgment first. If you understand, then I’ll take you back home.”

Saye was silent and obedient in the face of Tinasha’s lecture.

He knew what the beautiful woman said was correct. However, he didn’t think he was in the wrong. The boy wouldn’t have come this far if he had.

Strength of will shone brightly in his eyes. Tinasha gave a rueful smile when she saw it, reminded of Oscar.

Tinasha always scolded him over his brash behavior, but his judgment usually was correct—to an extent. At least in the sense that he was much better at getting everyone out of tough spots than his retinue of followers.

She understood that he wanted to do things himself so there wouldn't be any unnecessary deaths. Still, she wanted him to realize that he shouldn't keep it from his protector when he galloped off into danger. In the end, Oscar was a boy who loved adventure, too.

Saye observed the faint smile on Tinasha's lips and hesitated for a moment, but he finally gave a reluctant nod. He'd been worrying himself over how they were going to get back home anyway. Now that he'd calmed down, he felt grateful for the woman's offer.

Tinasha grinned and ruffled Saye's hair. At this, the boy scowled and brushed her hand away. "Don't treat me like a kid!"

"I have that done to me all the time, even at my age," she responded with a little shrug. Instead of tousling Saye's locks, she kissed his forehead.

After watching Tinasha and Saye's conversation in a daze, the other children ran to lead over their horses, which were hitched to some trees.

Once all were prepared, Tinasha opened up a transportation array without using an incantation. At her direction, the children entered it nervously.

Saye was the last one left, and he turned to look back at Tinasha. As he beheld her beautiful form, he hesitantly inquired, "Are you… Are you the witch?"

"…Who can say?" she answered, widening her eyes a little and giving him a sly grin.

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The next day, Tinasha went out to inspect the temple and the road leading to it. Then she conferred with Kumu and laid out a spell configuration covering the structure and the path. It took a full day to complete the spell. Once it was complete, its construction was a source of awe for the other mages.

Doan whispered to Kav, "Weren't Miss Tinasha's powers supposed to weaken, being a spirit sorcerer and all…?"

"Common rules don't apply to her," Kav breathed back.

The large spell the witch had woven sported two main effects.

First, it prevented anyone within it from using spells, excepting mages with prior permission. Of course, it would also nullify any magic cast outside it the moment it entered. Erecting this configuration had proved to be a great ordeal, but when it came to proactive defensive magic, it was first class.

Second, it allowed the spell caster to be aware of all that happened within the boundaries of the spell. Most would consider such large-scale surveillance magic virtually unthinkable to attempt.

The witch smiled as she winced at all the astonished mages. "The surveillance part of the spell is going to be more troublesome on the day of the procession than casting it was. But if I tried to devise something that

would automatically identify anyone suspicious, there would inevitably be some who could slip through the cracks… So it's best if I keep an eye on things myself."

On the day of the procession and ceremony, the witch would be aware of everything that went on within her spell's boundaries. The load on her brainpower would be extraordinary, far beyond the human capacity for information processing.

But she had chosen this spell for its reliability. That was how much of a toll the incident with the poisoned needle had taken on her.

Tinasha would never be able to forget the feeling of her blood congealing within her when she rushed to suspend time in Oscar's body after the poisoned needle had stuck him. Once she discovered who had dispatched that assassin, she intended to give them all the retribution they deserved.

Oscar heard Tinasha's briefing on the spell and approved it, though he eyed her with concern. "Are you going to be okay doing the surveillance like that?"

"It's not my first time. I'll be all right. But it will leave me a bit short when it comes to my own self-defense."

"Stay near me. That ensures your safety, so it kills two birds with one stone."

"Got it," Tinasha accepted with a weak smile, retreating over to the study wall to let Kumu give his report.

She had actually hoped to be high in the air during the festivities, avoiding any conspicuous locations, but Oscar's reasoning was sound and convincing. In close-range combat, he was unmatched.

After Kumu gave his report and left the room, Oscar started to put his documents in order. As he did, he recalled the events of the previous day. "Oh right, what did those kids who came to the tower want?"

"Oh, so about that…"

Tinasha gave a succinct summary of what had happened. Oscar listened to it as he completed his work. He frowned once he'd heard the full story. "Ten years old, and they don't think snow is real? I've gotta reform the education system."

"What? That's what you got from that?!"

"Well, that's what caused this," he concluded.

Public education was available in Farsas, but many children were too busy with tasks at home to attend.

As Oscar began to contemplate making education mandatory, Tinasha gave an innocent laugh. "I think it's a good thing to doubt what you hear. Although too much of it will keep you from getting anywhere, I suppose… Have you ever seen snow?"

"From far away, when we marched to Tayiri," he answered.

Located far to the north, Tayiri had plenty of tall mountains. The peaks were snowcapped year-round.

The witch was the reason Farsas's forces had made for Tayiri; when she heard Oscar's reply, the witch gave a vague smile. In haste, she turned to make some tea.

Oscar observed her from behind. "So why don't you want to get married?"

"Why that all of a sudden…?"

"Because I want to know. Am I the reason?"

After scowling for a bit, Tinasha finally let out a big sigh and spread her arms wide. "Do you remember when I told you before that you have magic?"

"Oh, that's right. I meant to ask you for more details about that."

The witch had informed him several times already that he possessed magic, but the pair always had more pressing issues to deal with, and he hadn't gotten the chance to hear more until now. Tinasha pointed to Oscar's chest. "I think that when you were a child, a mighty seal was put on your magic. That's why normal mages don't sense it… But you actually have an incredible amount of magical power. If you'd trained as a mage, you could have become an accomplished spell caster."

"…What?" Oscar blurted out, entirely taken aback.

Tinasha had told him before that his magic was locked away, but he hadn't even thought about how much power he might have.

Evidently, this was a subject the witch would have preferred to avoid, because as she continued, her expression soured. "We do say that magic isn't necessarily hereditary, but that's when we're talking about a mage born to parents who don't have magic. In your case, there is no doubt that any child of yours will be an incredibly strong mage. Normally speaking, no woman could bear a child with as much magic as a witch, and even if she could, the baby would probably be stillborn. Obviously, things would be a bit different if I'm the parent. If the child is a girl, she could very well be a witch from birth."

The implication was clear. This was why Tinasha didn't want to carry Oscar's child.

It was a possibility Oscar had never entertained. His child could be a witch.

With the truth of the matter thrust before him, even the brash Oscar found himself without a rebuttal for a short while.

He looked into Tinasha's dark eyes. Then his gaze dropped to his own hands. After managing to absorb the shock of this revelation, he asked, "What would happen if it's a boy?"

"He'd definitely inherit a fair amount of magic, but he'd wield Akashia. So long as he bears that weapon, he won't be able to concentrate his magic or cast spells. It's probably the same reason you took on Akashia so early."

"Do you mean my dad knew about my magic?"

"I pressed Kumu about this earlier, but he didn't know anything. This means that your mother or someone close to her must have done the sealing. I probably should have told you about it much earlier, but with the

curse, you weren't in a position to be taking a wife anyhow. And I wasn't too sure about meddling too much in your affairs…"

"I see…," Oscar murmured, thinking of his late mother.

She had died when he was five years old, and he had almost no memories of her.

Most people were able to recall some things from their early childhoods, but Oscar found himself curiously unable to conjure up more than a slim few. He certainly didn't know whether his mother had been a mage or not. Perhaps his father could shed some light on the matter.

Oscar sighed, thinking about himself and the past, then turned his mind back to the witch. He gazed at his beloved. "Do you think it would be bad to have such strong power from birth?"

"It doesn't seem like a good thing, no. Even more so when the person in question would be part of the royal family."

"But I have magic, don't I? And you were originally going to become a queen," Oscar countered, beckoning Tinasha over. She walked toward him, then sat on his lap with an unhappy look on her face. He embraced her lightly. "Don't reject the idea of power right from the start. Your own abilities have saved many people."

"And killed just as many, too," she said, eyes downcast. Her head was hanging low, and Oscar stroked her hair gently.

"My decision to fight has resulted in deaths as well. Tinasha, power is meant to be used. If this is a child that only you can bear, that means you have the strength to raise them. You can teach them bit by bit about their abilities and life—set them on the correct path. Don't throw out the possibility from the start. Give this child a chance to be born."

Tinasha was silent.

She just closed her eyes, overcome with emotions she couldn't accept.

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On the night before the New Year, the Farsas castle city was abuzz with commotion and cheer.

No place was busier than the castle itself, however. Ladies-in-waiting and magistrates dashed to and fro, all preparing for the ceremony and celebration.

Tinasha knew little of Farsas customs and had thought that the rites would take place early in the morning of the first day of the New Year. However, things actually began late at night. The New Year was welcomed at the temple.

Als was conducting final checks on the security inside the castle gate while in formal attire. He caught the scent of alcohol and festival merriment on the breeze and narrowed his eyes. "I wanna drink…"

"We're on the job," came a voice from behind him, accompanied by a punch to his back. It was his childhood friend, her hair tied up today. It was

standard for women to grow their hair long, but Meredina had always kept hers cut shorter than shoulder length for work. However, it had recently just barely eked onto her back. She was wearing a formal, deep-red officer's uniform with a long sword belted at her waist. "Looks like it might rain," she remarked.

"Hope it holds out till we get back to the castle," Als replied. Both of them gazed up at the inky clouds that concealed the starry sky. From time to time, a sliver of moonlight would peek out from gaps.

Precipitation would quickly put a damper on the festive mood, but more concerningly, security would be more challenging to enforce. Als prayed that everything would wrap up before it started raining.

A little over half an hour remained until they set out. All the necessary preparations had been made.

The mages had been divided into those stationed at the temple in advance and those who would be making the march from the castle. Soldiers and those mages who were still available had been stationed along the route as bodyguards.

Clad in ceremonial dress, Kumu and Doan stood in the hall with the rest of the party that would ride out. Before leaving, they checked in with the witch's spell configuration to investigate how the route looked. Tinasha had granted permission to use the spell to a select group of just under ten trusted mages, including these two. However, what they could perceive fell far below what the caster could. Thus the responsibility of surveillance fell mostly upon Tinasha alone.

The two mages scanned the surveillance spell and exchanged glances.

"Looks like nothing suspicious at the moment," stated Kumu.

"There's nothing abnormal at the temple, either," reported Doan.

They breathed a sigh of relief. The summoner of the demonic spirits that had attacked the castle a few weeks back was still at large. They couldn't be too careful.

Just then, the door at the back opened, and the young king entered. As he sauntered over, he checked on his gear and attire, then narrowed his eyes at Kumu. "How are things?"

"No problems to report," the mage responded.

"Good," Oscar said with a nod.

Historically speaking, ceremonial attire for the king of Farsas entailed military regalia. Oscar was clad in metal-plated armor and a deep crimson cape, with Akashia affixed at his waist. The entire ensemble brimmed with valor and majesty. When paired with his handsome features, he painted a gorgeous picture indeed. A small dragon perched atop his shoulder like a holy figurine, adding a layer of surreality to Oscar's appearance.

He looked around the room before cocking his head. "Where's Tinasha?"

"I thought she would be with you," answered Kumu.

"No, I haven't seen her," Oscar admitted.

Just as he was debating whether to send someone to get her, the witch entered the room. All three of the men sensed her presence and turned around, only to be struck dumb by the sight of her.

She was wearing a mage's formal dress.

But not that of Farsas casters—she wore the ceremonial robes of a mage of Tuldarr.

The long raiment was deep blue and white—the colors of the Tuldarr royal family. Intricate sigils were embroidered all over the witch's garments. Her long black hair was partially swept up, and a circlet and earrings made from strings of crystals gleamed faintly.

She was the very embodiment of transparent mystery, and Oscar couldn't hide his shock. "What happened here?"

"Sylvia and Pamyra got their hands on me," Tinasha explained. Even her makeup was exquisite. The two women had gleefully brought back mages' costumes and formal dress robes from the Tuldarr treasure vault for Tinasha.

Perhaps she'd gotten used to being treated like a dress-up doll, because Tinasha had let it slide with only a mild amount of pouting. Starting with the crystals inlaid in her wrist bracers, nearly every aspect of her ensemble seemed fashioned from ensorcelled implements.

Tinasha looked up, taking in Oscar's appearance, and said glibly, "You were already so beautiful that an ensemble like that suits you very well."

Oscar grimaced at that. "It feels pretty strange having you call me beautiful. That's not a compliment you give a man."

"Is it not? I only meant to give you a fair bit of praise," the witch responded, head tilted to the side in some confusion. Then she went to stand next to Kumu.

Oscar let out a held breath. "Well, let's be off."

All present bowed in response.

The hall door creaked open, and the procession strode out toward the main gate.

The soldiers leading the way cleared the large main street that wound toward the city's eastern section. Having been pushed to the edges of the road, the populace crowded to catch a glimpse of their king.

Next marched the officers commanded by Als. Following them was the group comprised of Oscar and the mages. It was late, and the excitement in the city had hit a fever pitch. Perhaps this was because the Farsas royal family tended to produce legendary talents generation after generation, or maybe Oscar was just that popular with his citizens.

As Saye peeked at the procession from between gaps in the crowd of adults in front of him, he noticed a woman riding sidesaddle on a horse right behind the king and gasped. The steed proceeded steadily, though she was not holding the reins, and she had her eyes closed.

Because the woman was wearing different clothes, there was an air of curious intensity and awe-inspiring majesty that had been absent the first

time Saye had seen her. There was no mistaking the lady's striking looks, however. She was indeed the woman he had met at the tower. Saye was wholly convinced that she was the witch, but when he thought back on it, she had spoken as if she knew the king. So maybe she was a court mage and not the witch.

Once the parade passed by, the road filled back up with hordes of people.

The king would come through again one hour into the New Year. Saye left and ran off to tell his friends about the woman he'd seen.

Oscar and his entourage reached the temple without incident. Everyone felt somewhat relieved.

The ancient building in the middle of a grassy plain was constructed of alabaster. This spacious temple was another side of Farsas that generally went unnoticed. Its tranquility masked a long history stretching back to the early Dark Age.

While it was called a temple, the structure was mostly bereft of ornamentation. The interior was a single wide, large room. At its rear stood seven stone pillars with densely packed letters carved into them. Each post was dedicated to one of the seven gods of Farsas.

As the ceremony began and the priests offered blessings and prayers, Oscar unsheathed Akashia before the altar. His attendants stood behind him, watching solemnly. Tinasha was near the entrance. Her eyes were shut while her consciousness was linked to the spell.

At long last, the priests concluded their recitations. Oscar then started into a speech dedicated to them. As he listened, Als checked the time.

Things were right on schedule. Soon the New Year would be upon them.

Priestesses started to pass out cups of red wine to the ceremony participants. The king finished another address and then took up a wine bottle that had been prepared for him. He divided its contents among three glasses on the altar.

After setting down the empty bottle, Oscar then took the first glass and poured it on the earth. The second he scattered skyward. Then he took the third glass and drained it into his mouth.

Following that, his retinue partook of their own glasses. Happy cries of celebration for the New Year rang out.

Tinasha observed the proceedings with her eyes cracked open.

She was not a citizen of Farsas, so she didn't consume the wine. The witch had a low tolerance for alcohol and had no desire to consume any while connected to the spell.

Admittedly, that was just an excuse, however.

Mixing with this group still gave Tinasha some pause. She couldn't shake her anxiety and fear over whether it would be right for her to stay past her contract and grow close to them.

Did his mother feel this uneasy too…?

As that sudden thought popped into Tinasha's mind, she winced at her own uncontrollable imagination.

Time moved ever on and on, carrying with it the fates of all sorts of different people.

The 527th year of Farsas history had begun, under its twenty-first king.

"Thanks for all your hard work. Let's finish out the second half," Oscar said, expressing his gratitude to his guard convoy. They all nodded, a variety of expressions on their faces.

The procession departed from the temple and made its way slowly across the ebon grasslands, with magic lights to lead the way. The air now felt damp, and it seemed likely to rain at any moment.

Oscar looked back to check and make sure the witch was right behind him. She still had her eyes closed to sense everything flowing into her mind. He was debating over whether to speak to her when he suddenly felt something.

Without a word, he had Akashia unsheathed. At the same time, the witch began an incantation.

"Let it be defined—I summon and control you. Thunder, appear and follow my command!"

The rest of the entourage gaped, wide-eyed.

In the next moment, a gigantic bolt of white lightning shot up from the earth toward the sky. An earsplitting sound rent the air as a blinding light lit up everything around.

When all that faded away, the world returned to darkness and silence once more.

Pale faced, Kumu asked Oscar, "What happened?!"

"Someone was watching us," Oscar answered grimly, stowing Akashia.

The rest of the retinue began to buzz at this distressing revelation.

Oscar checked on the witch. Her eyes were open, and she gave him a chagrined smile. "They got away," she stated, snapping her fingers in frustration.

When the people saw a pillar of lightning suddenly illuminate the eastern sky, a wave of murmurs rolled through the city.

Cries of concern for the king's safety erupted all over. Those who remained inside the castle were frantic with worry, too, but a report came in via magic informing them that the king was safe. A momentary relief spread throughout the castle.

However, Saye and his four friends had snuck out of the city and were on their way to the temple when the giant bolt of lightning struck, petrifying them with fear. They didn't know if they should keep going and check on things or head back to the city.

"What should we do, Saye?"

"You're the one who said we should go."

"Shut up. It'd be awful if something happened to His Majesty."

As the boys fell into argument, the king's party came into view.

While the children felt relieved, they also scurried to hide themselves. They didn't want to find out what kind of punishment they might get if anyone knew a bunch of kids had left the city to go take a look at the king. Managing to sneak into a nearby patch of brushwood, they dropped onto their bellies and held their breaths.

However, right when the procession passed in front of the brushwood, the beautiful woman spoke in a voice that rang out across the grassy plains. "Saye, come out from there."

When the boy heard his name, he almost jumped right up. He managed to suppress the urge, but the other four nudged him out anyway. The king's procession stopped, and everyone stared at him.

The woman in the center frowned at him. "Did you not understand my lecture? What are you doing out here?"

"…I'm sorry," he said, dropping his head obediently. He didn't think offering an excuse would do any good here.

Tinasha waved him closer. He came right up next to her, and Oscar watched the scene with amusement.

Saye was so nervous he went stiff as a board as he bowed deeply to Oscar. "Your Majesty, I'm very sorry. I just got curious."

"I don't mind, but you need to be careful," replied Oscar.

Tinasha reached out and pulled Saye up onto her horse. She didn't forget to shoot a warning at the bushes. "The rest of you come out, too. It looks like it's going to rain, so let's all head back together."

At the command, the remaining quartet of boys came stumbling out, all with guilty looks on their faces. Other members of the retinue picked them up, and the journey resumed.

Saye whispered to Tinasha from his position next to her on the horse, "Miss, how did you know we were there?"

"Because I'm monitoring the route. I can tell if anyone gets close," she explained.

Saye let his head sag, crestfallen. He'd come all the way out here in the first place because he wanted to know if she was really the woman at the tower, and although he'd accomplished that goal, he still felt like a failure.

The boy sighed. Then he felt something cold graze his cheeks and looked up at the dark sky. As if echoing his emotions, droplets had started to fall from the sky.

At the vanguard, Als gazed up at the rain. "Looks like we didn't make it. Your Majesty, should we find some shelter…?"

"It's fine," Oscar dismissed.

The city was already in sight. It wouldn't take them much longer.

Oscar felt more worried about the witch catching a chill and turned to check on her, only to find her whispering about something with the boy riding with her. She noticed his gaze on her and looked back at him with a mischievous glint flashing in her dark eyes.

Tinasha's lips quirked up in a grin as she spread her arms wide.

“I wish for a transformation. Let it fall without changing in form. May a frozen sigh be the turning point.”

A spell took shape within her hands. It leaped up from her arms and slowly expanded in size as it rose higher and higher.

Once it reached the skies and disappeared, the rain stopped.

Puzzled, everyone looked up at the sky only to see white specks come fluttering down.

The snow looked like little feathers. While the others were left speechless, Saye was thrilled and shouted to his friends, “Look, see! I told you!”

Tinasha giggled as she watched him. But it wasn’t just the children; all present stared up at the sky with their jaws hanging.

As Oscar watched a snowflake fall onto his palm and melt away, he looked back at the witch. “How did you do it?”

“I just froze the moisture up in the clouds. It only affects the area around me, but it’ll get us less wet than rain if we just brush it away.”

“So that’s how it works…,” he marveled, brushing away the snow that had fallen on his knees just as she said. Once the snow fell on the ground, it vanished into the grass. The sight of the white flakes wavering down in the darkness was like a gorgeous illusion.

“The world just opens up whenever I’m with you,” Oscar said, which made Tinasha’s eyes crinkle up into a smile.

When the procession reached town, they dropped off the children. The king’s return and their first sight of snow whipped the citizens into an unprecedented frenzy. Saye waved good-bye to the witch, looking reluctant to see her go, and she smiled back at him.

Oscar and his entourage made it back to the castle safely in the end, with no other disturbances aside from the suspicious gaze Tinasha had sensed in the grasslands.

Oscar made his way through the hectic, bustling castle to a balcony from which he greeted the people and gave a speech.

Exhausted from maintaining and monitoring such a vast spell, Tinasha collapsed onto a couch at the back of the room. Sleep beset her, but she still kept up a three-layered barrier around the balcony.

Once the king finished giving his remarks and came back inside, he looked down at her with concern. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. My nerves are just a little on edge,” the witch admitted.

Als and Kumu, who were acting as the king’s guards, breathed sighs of relief that everything was over.

Oscar turned to them with a smile. “Thanks for all your hard work. Als, you can go have a drink now.”

“…Thanks, Your Majesty,” replied Als with a bow. He left the room looking like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He probably planned to invite Meredina to go out and join the party in town. Kumu checked to make sure the aftermath of Tinasha’s spell was fully dealt with

before he took his leave as well. The other guard soldiers retreated to their usual posts.

Finally, Oscar picked up one very listless witch. Her eyes fluttered open as she protested, “I can walk on my own…”

“Eh, just let me spoil you,” he said. She pouted at that, but gave a little nod and buried her face in his chest. He left the room and carried her down the hall. Lulled by the comfortable rocking motion, she let out a shallow exhalation.

Before, she was never able to stand being carried like this.

But now she was completely fine. It was hard to say whether that was because she had settled her debts from four hundred years ago or because it was this man carrying her.

Fighting her sleepiness to stay awake, Tinasha murmured to him, “About what we discussed the other day…”

“Which part?” he asked.

“About getting married.”

“Ah. What about it?”

“I need you to give me a little more time to think. Until the end of the contract…”

“Okay,” Oscar agreed immediately.

Tinasha felt relieved.

Their contract was actually supposed to end soon after the New Year began, but both of them had tacitly agreed not to count the month and a half Tinasha had spent in Cuscull.

As a result, the remaining time came to just shy of two months. Hopefully, it would be enough for Tinasha to determine what she wanted going forward.

Oscar looked down at the witch in his arms. In her formal robes, she radiated a sense of elusive unreality. A vision of her disappearing from his arms flashed across his mind, and he winced.

“You know, I talked to my dad about it,” Oscar began, and Tinasha jerked. Her dark eyes turned to stare at him. “He said that he was selfish in his choice of a wife, too, so he didn’t intend to make me do anything he didn’t have to just because of magic or the like. He told me to do what I want.”

“I see…”

“I’m glad he followed his heart. It’s the reason I’m here now,” Oscar stated.

The witch gave him a somewhat sad smile in return. She looked down and away, murmuring, “I’m glad, too.”

Separated by four hundred years, Oscar and Tinasha would ordinarily have never met. They were grateful for the moments they’d had together, while continuing to build up more time with each other. It was still too early to say whether that time would be brief or something more long lasting.

Joys and tragedies did not present themselves until they were right around the corner.

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Dazzling moonlight streamed into the dark room.

Outside the window, there was not a cloud in the sky. In the spacious room, a woman purred with amusement, “And how was she?”

“Just as she always is. But…her spell seemed a little different. Her magic may have weakened. I’m not sure if it was my imagination…,” answered the man.

At that, the woman’s eyes widened. “Has she fallen for someone? How foolish of her, seeing as she was just on the brink of death. Although things will be much more interesting if she has shed her life as a spirit sorcerer.”

The woman laced her hands together. Eyes lowered, she fell into thought. A cruel sort of delight flashed in her green eyes, which also appeared blue from certain angles.

“Very well. We’ll kill if the opportunity arises. I think we’ve reached a stopping place in this game.”

“As you wish,” the man replied, bowing his head deeply in response to his master’s order.

No others were present to hear them.

The woman’s words were those that had been shunned since ancient times, for they were the words of a witch.

5. Night of Clipped Talons

“Tinasha?”

The following morning, Oscar woke up a bit later than usual, only to realize that no one was next to him in bed. He shook his head groggily.

But then he remembered that he’d put Tinasha to bed in her own room, considering how exhausted she was after the New Year ceremony. She was probably still deep in sleep. Based on how exhausting the night before had been, she might not wake up for a while longer. Smiling to himself, Oscar prepared for the day.

Even after he and his protector witch became lovers, she still had a blind spot when it came to him, evidently. She left herself as vulnerable in her devotion to him as she had when she risked her life for him.

That was why Oscar was making a conscious effort to keep things the same as they had been and restrain himself. If he wasn’t careful, he could very well lose himself entirely to this precious woman he’d finally caught hold of. However, many had said that Oscar and Tinasha already looked like a couple, so it hardly mattered.

“Becoming a mother, huh…,” the king murmured, referring to two people at once.

He meant both the witch, who was hesitant to become a parent, and his own mother, who had likely debated the idea but had ultimately still decided to have him.

Oscar’s father hadn’t said so explicitly, but he could tell based on his father’s behavior that his mother had been quite the mage. That was probably why her parents had opposed the marriage. No parent would want their mage daughter marrying into the royal family that possessed the Mage Killer.

As for royal bloodlines, very few countries in their land had ever had a mage ruler. Naturally, it was impossible to prevent mages from being born. But while Farsas was not a magic-shunning country like Tayiri, no mages had ever appeared in the Farsas royal family—which was likely due to the influence of Akashia.

Taking up this sword meant that its bearer could not use magic, even if they possessed magical power. If Oscar hadn't been cursed and subsequently met Tinasha, he might have gotten buried in the annals of history as a nonmage king.

Sighing, Oscar recalled what his father had said:

"Soon after you were born, Rosalia, your mother, placed the seal. Said she might as well, though you wouldn't need it anyway."

When Oscar heard that, all he could think was, *You should have told me sooner.* But perhaps his father had wanted to respect Rosalia's wishes as much as he could. She had died at only thirty. The memory of his queen, who'd passed so young, was still deeply imprinted on his father.

Oscar, who had almost no memories of his mother, started to break into a bitter smile…but then he suddenly felt a headache come on. He pressed a hand to his temple.

Moon shines on
White nails
Night
Red of scattered blood
It lies ahead

For just a moment, images that formed no concrete symbols or sentences flashed in the king's mind. Then they all vanished.

Finding it strange, Oscar shook his head, but he seemed to recall the fragments that had all scattered away.

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"Urgh, I slept too late… I'm sorry," said Tinasha when she finally appeared in the study around afternoon teatime.

She stood in the doorway looking ashamed of herself, and Oscar grinned and beckoned her over. She sat on his lap and looked up at him. "Do you want some tea?"

"Later," he answered, carding his fingers through her hair and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Her eyes narrowed happily before she reached out to pick up some of the documents spread out on the desk. "You've already got so much to do right from the first day of the New Year."

"It's precisely *because* it's the first day of the New Year," he explained.

"I'll help you," the witch offered, riffling through the papers and picking out some that weren't especially urgent. She hopped down from his lap and moved to the couch to put them in order.

Shortly after, Lazar arrived to report on the post-festival cleanup. Tinasha set aside the documents she had taken for the moment and made tea. It was the picture of yet another peaceful day.

Lazar had Oscar sign a sheet before reading out the next unresolved issue on the agenda. "We've received details regarding Gandona's Founding Day celebration."

“I don’t wanna go,” stated Oscar, mainly just to say it.

“You have to,” Lazar insisted, rejecting him instantly anyway. Oscar made a sour face.

Just as Farsas held a birthday celebration for the king, the Great Nation of Gandona to the east had its own annual festivities open to international guests. One member of the royal family from each country needed to attend. Usually, that would be a prince or princess, but in Farsas the only royal at the moment was Oscar. The preceding king had already abdicated, so Oscar had to go.

Tinasha tilted her head curiously as she placed a cup of tea in front of him. “How long will it take?”

“Should be an overnight stay over there. It’s about the same as the celebration we have here. After taking a transport to the fortress of Minnedart, I’ll continue on horseback, which might take some time,” answered Oscar.

“Will they be upset if you’re transported directly to an area near the Gandona royal palace?” Tinasha inquired.

“I don’t think so, as long as we give them advance notice… Could you do that?”

“Easily,” the witch said, tea tray still in her hands. “Long-distance transportation is just a matter of getting the coordinates. If one has them, there shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Do you know the coordinates?” he asked.

“I’ve been there in the past,” she said.

“Then I’ll be counting on you. That’ll make things a lot easier,” Oscar decided.

Tinasha gave him a soft smile, then returned the documents she’d compiled to him. He listened to her brief explanation of them before adding his signature.

Now that Oscar didn’t have to worry about traveling to Gandona, he could leave on the day of the celebration, two weeks from now. Realizing something, he looked up at Tinasha. “That reminds me. Did the demonic spirits who broke into the castle teleport in directly?”

“There’s no way I’d allow that… Someone corroded my wards, and the spirits slipped in through that hole. It was like it melted away. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think there was anyone capable of doing that to my safeguards. I’m at fault for not noticing sooner.”

“You were pretty out of it right around that time, huh?” Oscar commented.

“You’re half to blame for that!” she cried, flushing a deep red as she threw the tray at him. Oscar caught it neatly.

Ever since that incident, Tinasha had been fine-tuning the castle wards even further. But both she and Oscar knew it wasn’t an entirely foolproof countermeasure. If they pursued one tack, the enemy would simply devise another strategy. In the end, it was like a game of cat and mouse. As long as

their opponent's identity was unknown, all they could do was guard themselves against any possible threats.

"Well, speaking of eastern countries, Yarda's been acting pretty suspicious, too. I guess I might as well go to this Gandona thing," Oscar remarked casually.

"Of course you're going to go, Your Majesty…," retorted Lazar.

The neighboring country of Yarda had lost to Farsas in the war eleven years prior; it also shared a border with Gandona. Yarda should also be sending someone to the celebration.

Oscar murmured as he made his way through the remaining papers on his desk, "I'll have Tinasha with me, so I don't need that many guards. Oh, let's bring Pamyra or Sylvia. You'll need someone to dress you, no?"

All of a sudden, the conversation turned to Tinasha, and her eyes widened. Shock and dread crept across her face. "Why would I need to be dressed by someone? I can do it myself."

"You'll need it for getting into your gown," Oscar replied matter-of-factly.

"I knew it! I'm not dressing up! I'm going there to guard you!" she protested, remembering when she'd attended King Kevin's birthday ball several months prior. She'd sorely regretted becoming an object of jealousy and spectacle. And this time, there would be quite a few guests who knew that she was a witch. She had absolutely no idea how she could dare to make an appearance.

Oscar must have thought of all that, too. He rested his chin in his hands. "Well, that's true… Never mind, then."

But before Tinasha could even breathe a sigh of relief at that, Lazar interjected, "But Miss Tinasha is Your Majesty's fiancée."

"Oh," blurted Tinasha.

"Now that you mention it…," Oscar began.

After a beat, Tinasha began to panic. She moaned, "I had forgotten you told people that…"

"I forgot, too," admitted Oscar.

During the postwar negotiations between the Four Great Nations, Oscar had told everyone that Tinasha was his fiancée, which was why he was allowed to take her in. It was only a pretense, and so both of them had completely discarded it.

It was more than likely that many of the royals and prime ministers from the other countries had seen through that for the lie it was. Many smaller countries still tried to send their daughters to Farsas to at least become one of Oscar's royal mistresses. As pretenses went, this one did not offer any real benefit to Oscar or to Tinasha.

Tinasha was at her wit's end. "Nooo, what should we do?"

She could already feel the piercing, cold glares of dozens of eyes on her. Oscar sighed to see her looking so noticeably dismayed. "I won't mind if you don't attend. Just make sure I know where you are."

“I-I’m sorry for this…,” the witch apologized, lowering her head meekly. She knew this was something she should take on herself, but right now, she was waffling over her own position. She had no clear answer on how she should act.

She had thought that everything would fall into place as long as she knew that she loved him. But using that alone to resolve the situation had put the two of them in a difficult position.

Tinasha bit her lip, thinking of her own weakness and of the crossroads she was at.

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On the eve of the Gandona Founding Day, Oscar and Tinasha departed in the company of Als and five soldiers.

Of course, Gandona would be handling the security within its own castle. It wouldn’t be fair to bring too many people and appear as if Farsas didn’t trust the local security.

Upon exiting the transportation array the witch had summoned, the group found itself right outside the Gandona castle city. From there, the party of eight rode in on horseback. It was close enough to walk, but it would look quite suspicious if they did that.

They received a warm welcome when they arrived at the castle, and they were shown to their assigned chambers. The first item on the schedule was the celebratory ball, which began in the evening and lasted until late at night. Then they would stay the night in the castle before returning home.

As Oscar changed into his full dress regalia and Tinasha cast a barrier around the room, he said to her, “What did you come to Gandona for in the past?”

“I was asked to slay a demonic spirit,” she answered.

“Makes sense,” Oscar replied.

She finished conjuring the barrier, looked Oscar over, then floated up to tidy up his hair. He caught her in his arms.

“If you sense anything strange or suspect, call my name. I’ve made it so that I’ll know right away,” she informed him.

“Got it. What are you going to do?” Oscar asked.

“I’ll be in the ballroom. Somewhere you can see me,” Tinasha responded, flashing him an elegant, enchanting smile and giving him a soft kiss.

The Founding Day celebrations were held in the castle ballroom.

It was a vast oval-shaped hall that could hold three hundred guests. A glass ceiling crowned an atrium that was several stories tall. Galleries ran along the outer edges of the chamber, spiraling upward to the top.

The highest gallery commanded a view down onto the hall from a considerable height. And it was from there that Tinasha, dressed in a sparsely ornamented black gown, watched the festivities below.

Gandona guard soldiers passed by every so often, but other than that, she was alone. Down below, the king of Gandona had just given a welcome speech. Now people were milling about and conversing. The noble young ladies' brightly colored dresses were like flowers in full bloom.

Tinasha spied the king of Farsas—her beloved—surrounded by a cluster of those dresses. Als was next to him as his guard, and at the moment, nothing seemed worthy of suspicion.

Why had he chosen her?

The witch had asked Renart that, and she still didn't know the reason. Nevertheless, she didn't intend to ask Oscar again. He had made his decision, and Tinasha only hoped that his choice wouldn't put him at any disadvantage. In the end, she was his witch. That hadn't changed even though they were lovers now.

Besides, Tinasha was not the jealous sort.

Any emotions of deep jealousy had worn away over the past four hundred years. So the only thing she felt upon seeing Oscar surrounded by ladies was guilt that she had escaped attending as his date; she didn't feel any possessiveness. Even if he took one of the girls as his lover instead of her, she would probably just feel sad—she wouldn't resent him. Tinasha thought there was nothing wrong with that.

If, by any chance, she felt jealous and it morphed into resentment, she could destroy everything in a fit of anger. That was why Tinasha dealing with the sadness by herself was far preferable.

Leaning over the banister, she gazed upon the scene below. All of a sudden, someone next to her offered her a glass. "How about a drink?" said a young man with a soft voice.

"I don't drink. You know that," the witch stated curtly, and in a much more casual and clipped tone than she normally used. She turned around. There before her stood a slender man with silver hair and black eyes who looked to be about twenty-five.

He was almost abnormally beautiful. His features were so handsome that as long as he smiled and said nothing, girl after girl would fall victim to love for him. The figure he cut oozed such nobility that anyone would believe he was some royal family member's illegitimate son.

But when he met the witch's gaze, an evil smile spread on his lips. "It's been a while. You've grown into one fine-looking woman. Is that because you've got yourself a man now?"

"Not at all. I grew up because I got injured."

"You have all that power, and yet you got yourself hurt. Humans are so fragile," he commented.

"I'm perfectly fine with what I have," Tinasha shot back.

The man smirked, then the wineglass in his hands vanished. He came to stand next to Tinasha at the railing, looking down at the party. His gaze landed on Oscar. "So that means the one with the oddly colored hair really is your man, does it?"

“Yes. And don’t call his hair ‘oddly colored.’”

“I’d want him if he were a woman. What a shame.”

“Don’t say gross things…,” Tinasha groaned, clutching her head as she could almost feel a headache coming on.

This man was an old acquaintance, and he loved nothing more than riling people up. Almost all of those who fell beneath his gaze met with hapless misfortune. Tinasha felt soul-deep gratitude that Oscar was a man.

She turned cold eyes on her unwelcome companion. “So what are you doing here? Causing more trouble?”

“I’ll have you know that I’m currently a duke of this country. And there’s a girl I’ve got my eye on, too,” he informed her.

“I feel sorry for her…,” Tinasha remarked. Her heart went out to this poor woman she’d never met.

The man frowned, as if her reaction was entirely unexpected. “I’m raising her very carefully.”

“I—I see… Don’t go overboard,” replied Tinasha. She didn’t really care to hear details. There was undoubtedly nothing good about this scenario.

The man glared at the witch but then gave up on it and sighed. Tinasha returned her attention to the floor below.

Just then, it felt like Oscar looked up at her for a moment. But one of the girls around him said something, and he looked back all too soon.

Tinasha watched him, a fond smile on her lips. The man next to her eyed her with some amusement. “You’ve really lost your edge. Has the lack of a goal left you soft? I could probably kill you right now.”

“Want to try?” she invited, slowly straightening up as she stared back at him. Her lips curled up into a smile, but her eyes glinted with belligerent sparks.

Observing as magic pooled in her willowy body, the man smirked. “Oh? I had no idea you could make such a face. Well, I’m not gonna do anything. If I cause any sort of a fuss, I’ll get an earful from…”

“Travis!” someone shouted before he could finish speaking, and he flinched.

The two of them whirled around to see a beautiful young woman of fifteen or perhaps sixteen. She was wearing a pale-green gown, and her silver hair was a bit closer to a gray color than the man’s.

She strode briskly over to him and punched him in the stomach. “Picking up girls again! You need to learn your lesson. You’re always up to no good! What if you cause a diplomatic incident?!”

Travis grabbed her wrist, grinning as if her punch had caused him no pain at all. Tinasha stared at the girl in shock.

The girl shook off his hand, faced Tinasha properly, and curtsied to her. “I apologize for his conduct. My name is Aurelia Canao Naysha Faurecia.”

“Ah, I’m Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr,” Tinasha replied, lulled into giving her full name by the girl’s excessively polite introduction. As she

returned the curtsy, Tinasha realized that the girl carried the aristocratic last name of a clan that had married into the Gandona royal family.

The witch looked at Travis, who appended, “I’m her guardian.”

This must be the girl he’d said he had an eye on. This was the first time Tinasha had seen him acting as a guardian among nobles; he famously hated getting involved in anything too messy.

The girl named Aurelia absorbed Tinasha’s introduction, then glared at Travis again. “Isn’t this the fiancée of the king of Farsas? What do you think you’re doing?!”

“She’s an old acquaintance,” he explained.

“That’s obviously a lie…,” Aurelia started to say.

“Oh, it’s true,” interjected Tinasha with a raise of her hand, still taken aback by Aurelia’s fierce spirit.

“Really?” the young woman questioned, distrust, worry, and jealousy in her eyes.

The witch found that amusing, and Travis clapped the girl lightly on the shoulder. “Relax. She’s not my type at all.”

“Don’t say something so rude!” cried Aurelia, flushing bright red. Tinasha burst out laughing.

Once Aurelia recovered her composure, she asked Tinasha, “What are you doing up here? You could go downstairs.”

“I’m here as a guard,” Tinasha answered honestly, with a broad smile. If this girl knew that she was Oscar’s fiancée, she must also know that Tinasha was a witch, but she didn’t seem to mind. It was quite intriguing.

When Travis heard that, he arched an eyebrow. “Oh? You’re engaged?”

“In the eyes of the public, yes,” the witch answered.

“How interesting. It would be so fun if you gave birth to his child.”

“It would not, which is why I’m undecided about marrying him,” Tinasha responded bluntly, then realized that the girl’s face had clouded over. Travis seemed to notice the same thing, as he put an arm around her and pulled her in close.

After a bit of hesitation, Aurelia looked up and stared right at Tinasha. “Do you hate children?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that, but…”

“It’s because she’s a witch. She’s afraid that her child might become one, too,” Travis detailed, quickly deducing the source of Tinasha’s hesitation. This was partially due to their long acquaintanceship, but more than that, it was because the man understood what magic was like.

With an awkward smile, Tinasha nodded.

Aurelia cocked her head to one side, clearly finding that odd. “Is that all?”

“That’s all,” she answered as the girl’s light-blue eyes bored into hers. Next to her, Travis grinned.

After another hesitant pause, Aurelia spoke up in a shy manner that still belied her strong will. “It’s hard for me to understand how difficult things are for the witches, but if that’s your only reason not to, you shouldn’t hesitate. Once your child is born, they’ll undoubtedly experience both hardships and joys, but it’s better to handle those things together rather than feel so worried about what might happen that you don’t have a child at all. That’s what I think your future offspring would want.”

Her sincere words of advice were spoken plainly, but they were no less potent for that.

The witch’s eyes grew wide. She found herself unable to think of an immediate retort.

Tinasha’s reaction made Aurelia grow ashamed of what she’d said, and she dropped into an apologetic bow.

“I’ve said too much and forgotten my place. I’m very sorry,” she stated, slipping out of Travis’s arms and running off down the stairs.

Tinasha watched her go and sighed. “…That’s a remarkable girl.”

“She was born with an unusual ability no one wanted her to have,” Travis explained.

“Was she?! I’ve said something awful, then…”

In that case, no wonder she took the witch’s indecisiveness so personally. Tinasha felt abashed, realizing she’d made an insensitive remark without realizing.

Travis eyed her, a sly grin on his lips. “She’s not so easily hurt. Anyway, how did it feel to have someone more than four hundred years younger than you give you a lecture?”

“Very illuminating.” Tinasha sighed, covering her face with one hand.

She was acting terribly hesitant and was rapidly growing fed up with it.

She needed to at least hold her head up a little higher, for the sake of the man who had chosen her without any faltering at all.

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By the time the ball came to a close, Oscar was holding back nausea from inhaling the lingering scents of a dozen different perfumes.

As he and Als exited the hall, a cluster of young ladies rushed after them. While he could sense what they were after, he took one step into the hallway and said, “Tinasha.”

In the wide dark corridor that still had only a few people in it, a woman dressed in black appeared. Her long black hair was down, and her dark eyes were like night itself. The woman’s beauty embodied peace and tranquility, and her eyelashes fluttered bewitchingly as she beheld him.

“I’m here,” she said in a clear, resonant voice imbued with otherworldly mystery.

Ignoring the noble young ladies left breathless behind him, Oscar walked over to the witch and kissed the top of her head. “It’s over. Let’s go back to the room.”

“I hope you had a good time,” she said.

“Wash my hair for me. In exchange, I’ll give the cat a bath.”

“I told you that I don’t like getting wet when I’m a cat. I’ll wash your hair, so you leave the cat out of it,” she stated as they made their way down the corridor, standing close enough to each other to make their intimacy readily apparent.

That little display and how beautiful Tinasha was made the young ladies stop in their tracks. Als cracked a wry smile at how his king must have predicted what would happen and called the witch down for just this purpose. Although it was also very possible that he was exhausted and just wanted to see her.

Oscar brought her to their room and finally breathed out a sigh of relief. “I’m so tired…”

“I can tell,” Tinasha replied, taking his jacket and grimacing at the scent of perfume wafting off it in waves. This must be part of the reason he hated appearing at diplomatic functions. But even so, he didn’t complain more than he needed to, because he knew it was his responsibility. Oscar headed off to bathe, while the witch changed out of her gown into a short slip and tied her hair up.

Oscar had long employed a lady-in-waiting as his personal attendant, but now that he and Tinasha were lovers, he preferred to have her help him instead.

The witch entered the bathroom to find Oscar soaking in the bathtub, gazing idly up at the steam clouding the ceiling. This was a side of himself

that Oscar usually never showed to others, and Tinasha smiled faintly. “It sounds like you had quite the ordeal tonight.”

“So much unnecessary conversation… Doing work in my study would’ve been much easier,” Oscar griped.

The witch knelt down next to the bathtub and began to shampoo Oscar’s hair. She used magic to adjust the water flow, working her ivory fingers deep into his tawny hair. Oscar closed his eyes happily like a great big dog, which made Tinasha giggle.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“I’m not telling. Anyway, did anything out of the ordinary happen?” As the king’s protector, Tinasha wanted to be apprised of any future disturbances.

Oscar got straight to the point. “The princess of Yarda didn’t show.”

“She chose not to come?”

“Gandona looked into it, and she did leave Yarda. She just didn’t arrive,” he said.

“That’s a very big problem…,” Tinasha observed.

From Farsas’s perspective, their eastern neighbor Yarda was currently in a state of domestic turmoil. Based on cobbled-together hearsay, the royal court seemed to be splitting into factions. One side was preparing for conflict, so rumors were swirling that a civil war was on the horizon. Other nations that bordered Yarda seemed aware of the unrest as well, so everyone had kept a keen eye out for the princess’s appearance.

Yet she hadn’t shown. Or perhaps she hadn’t been able to.

Oscar slicked back his wet bangs. “According to Gandona, Yarda lost track of them before they reached the border. Something must’ve happened.”

“Is she the only member of the Yarda royal family?”

“No, she should have an older brother. I think the king is already pretty old.”

“I see…,” she said.

When Yarda had declared war on Farsas and lost eleven years ago, their princess had been offered to Oscar as his bride. This meant that she was around Oscar’s age, possibly a child born late in the king of Yarda’s life. Oscar wondered how her brother felt about his little sister going missing.

“If this looks like it’s going to get complicated, I can send out a familiar and investigate things,” Tinasha offered.

“That’s an idea… I’ll keep an eye on the situation, and if things appear to be headed toward something drawn out, I’ll have you do just that,” Oscar answered.

“As you wish,” Tinasha accepted, rinsing off Oscar’s hair before pressing a kiss to his forehead. She got up to leave the bath, but Oscar grabbed her hand, and she almost fell. She rushed to latch on to the edge of the tub. “Wh-what is it…? That was dangerous.”

“I have something I want to ask you, too,” Oscar said.

“Wha…?” Tinasha managed, an ominous feeling growing inside her as Oscar dragged her into the tub with him. He pulled her onto his lap, still in her slip, and she smiled stiffly at him. “Seriously, what?”

“You were talking with a man during the party, weren’t you? Was he human?”

“Whoa… You saw that?” the witch blurted out. So that moment when she seemed to catch Oscar’s eye hadn’t merely been her imagination.

He nodded. “I did. Apparently, that guy’s a duke here, but something’s off about him.”

“Ah… I didn’t think any humans could see through his facade. He’s actually the highest-ranking demon. In layman’s terms, he’s the demon king,” Tinasha explained honestly. The information clearly took Oscar aback. The witch scratched at her temple awkwardly and went on. “There are many different types of demons, but high-ranking ones like him and the spirits who serve me are in a class of their own. Their power is incomparable to that of ordinary demonic spirits, and by their nature, they do not take much interest in humans. At least, they normally don’t…”

“Highest ranking?” Oscar inquired.

“Yes. The highest-ranking class consists only of my twelve spirits and other demons like that man. Ordinarily, they would never appear in the human realm. But he’s always been the lone exception… He finds humans endlessly amusing. He’s lived in this realm for hundreds of years already, and he’ll meddle in and disrupt the lives of humans who catch his eye. He’ll sneak into a royal court and instigate family feuds or start wars… He’s a troublemaker.”

“And you know him?” Oscar pressed.

“Do you recall when I said that Gandona once requested that I slay a demon? That was him,” Tinasha said, turning around so she could lie against Oscar’s chest. “I succeeded in driving him out at the time, but I wound up pretty seriously injured for it. I think of him as a friend, but our opinions don’t align, so we’ve tried to kill each other many times. I’m not sure what he thinks of me, though.”

“…Wow. That’s a lot to take in,” Oscar murmured, sounding overwhelmed and exhausted. Tinasha laughed. Not many things ruffled him, but of course, this story of high-ranking demons would leave him weary.

Her innocent laugh made Oscar frown. He tightened his hold on her. “You two looked awfully close.”

Tinasha’s eyes widened, as his remark caught her off guard for a moment, but she quickly replied in a voice like tinkling bells, “He has no interest in witches. He actually seemed more into you, so don’t get too close to him!”

“What the hell… I’m going to get a headache listening to all this,” Oscar said, tipping up her chin so she faced him. As he gazed into her dark eyes, seeing only himself reflected back, he leaned in and gave her a deep, sighing kiss.

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After midnight, the Gandonan prime minister and magistrates were reminiscing about the evening in the ballroom—with some complaints mixed in—as they tidied up. None of the international guests were around, so the conversation naturally turned to the country causing conflict. One official gazed up at the atrium and remarked, “Yarda’s official report is that their princess is missing, but it seems more likely that they didn’t want to send her.”

“I bet they didn’t want anyone trying to probe into what they’re up to.”

“If she’d come, we could’ve had a hostage, though.”

“That course of action would be unwise,” scolded Prime Minister Nellechi after listening to the magistrates’ exchange, clicking his tongue disapprovingly.

By all accounts, Yarda was preparing for war. If the nation intended to make Gandona the first target of its hostilities, Gandona would need to teach them their place. As one of the Great Nations, Gandona was far above its lowly neighbor.

However, if it truly came to open conflict, Gandona would suffer damages, too. To prevent this, Nellechi wanted his country to strengthen its foundations inside and out. Yet the king’s conduct during the ball had left Nellechi feeling slightly dissatisfied.

For one, the king had not acted like someone preparing for war. In Nellechi’s opinion, the king’s children had all grown up spoiled and were indisputably incompetent. The next in line for the throne after them, Aurelia, was strong minded and decisive. Unfortunately, her personality was a bit difficult to handle because she had grown up abandoned by her parents. She also had the odious Travis behind her to boot. Even Great Nations had a host of troubles bubbling away under the surface.

“If we could secure Farsas as our ally…,” muttered Nellechi.

Similarly, if Yarda formed a political marriage with bordering Farsas, the situation would turn in their favor.

However, Farsas…had a witch.

Nellechi had caught only a glimpse of her, but her beauty was breathtaking. The princess of Gandona would pale in comparison. The young king of Farsas had once negotiated with the other Great Nations to obtain that witch. He wouldn’t let go of her so easily.

Feeling annoyed by the circumstances not going the way he would prefer, Nellechi muttered to the magistrates around him, “Witches are so annoying. Worthless creatures.”

“That’s a pretty rude thing to say,” came a woman’s icy voice. It echoed around the hall, seemingly from nowhere, and Nellechi froze.

He looked all around but saw no woman present. He thought maybe he was hearing things, but his fellows all had stricken looks on their faces.

Nellechi’s knees quivered with instinctive fear. “Who’s there?!”

He couldn’t see anyone, but he could sense the woman laughing. Then she whispered in a lilting tone, “No one.”

With an awful sound, the glass of all the windows in the ballroom shattered.

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Als was sleeping in the anteroom outside Oscar’s bedchamber when he heard the distant sound of something breaking and woke up. Acting on reflex, he grabbed his sword and jumped out of bed.

First, he checked to make sure nothing had happened to the door to the back room. Then he crept into the hall. The two guard soldiers posted outside eyed their general in confusion. “Has something happened?”

“Didn’t you hear that weird noise?” Als asked.

“I haven’t heard a peep…,” one guard replied.

Maybe it was his imagination. Frowning, Als was about to head back in when he heard a woman’s scream and angry roars coming from beyond the corridor. “What was that?!”

Unsheathing his sword, he rushed out into the hallway and stared down toward one dark end of the passage.

There was nothing there.

But it felt like something was getting closer.

He steadied his breathing and held his sword at the ready.

Footfalls echoed softly, but there was also the distinct sound of surging air.

Winged demons flew down the hallway.

There were three of them. All were identical to the ones that had attacked Farsas Castle some time ago.

One of them was dragging an unconscious or possibly dead soldier in its claws. Behind them, Als spied Gandona guards giving chase.

Als exhaled and leaped toward the demon in the lead. Its sharp talons extended to tear him limb from limb. He dodged them by a hair, then used his full strength to slice the demon apart at the waist. The second demon tried to use its wings to whack him down, which he evaded. Then he dashed to the third one and lopped off the leg that was clutching the soldier. An earsplitting shriek echoed down the hall.

Als jumped back and turned to face the second demon, which was fluttering near the window. Silvery moonlight illuminated its grotesque form. Just as Als readjusted his grip on his sword and stared at the ominous sight, a fresh pack of demons swooped down outside, barreling toward the window.

“What? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

There were well over ten of the creatures gliding toward the man now. The Gandonan soldiers who had battled the other demons were stunned, speechless at the sight.

The second demon, the one floating by the window, let out a mocking, shrill cry. This lured over the new troops, which raised their glittering talons to smash the glass pane.

However, before they could, an intangible shock wave rolled out from a room far back in the hallway.

Like a swirling tornado, it destroyed the door, broke the window, and swallowed up the demonic spirits outside. Shards of glass and wood burst into the night sky. The attack had been too swift for the creatures to evade, and their numbers were instantly halved.

On the other hand, the humans gasped and looked to the source of the wave of force.

A disgruntled-looking young man stepped out from behind the broken door. The king of Farsas, Akashia in hand and clad in only sleep pants, looked at Als and the surviving demons with a face dark with ire. “What’s going on? Some kind of damn plague?”

“I’m very sorry for disturbing you,” Als said with a bow, which was when one demon swooped down on Oscar. A single cut with Akashia was all it took to fell the thing, though. The other creatures hissed hatefully over the death of their comrade. They made to plunge at Oscar all at once.

Yet another shock wave sent them reeling. In an instant, the corridor was strewn with bits of demon flesh, leaving the Gandonan soldiers in a daze.

A woman’s clear voice reverberated in the dark corridor. “Oscar, is everything all right?”

“Don’t come out in that!” he cried as the king’s witch appeared in nothing but a white slip, running a hand through sleep-mussed hair. Als and the Farsas soldiers hastily averted their eyes.

However, the Gandonan soldiers forgot all courtesy and stared in a trance at the enchanting beauty.

Tinasha herself paid none of that any mind and walked over to one of the fallen demons’ corpses. “This creature…”

No sooner had she reached toward it than a laugh rippled through the hallway, and the witch became acutely aware of another woman’s mysterious aura.

Tinasha’s face twisted. “Have you come to die?”

Immediately, she cast a bit of magic. Oscar realized it was a transportation spell and reached for her, but he was a moment too late, and she was already gone. He curled the hand that had failed to catch hold of his love into a fist and cursed her. “Of all the idiot things!”

Clicking his tongue in frustration, Oscar looked out the window and saw that all the lights were on in the ballroom, despite it being after midnight. Voices were clearly coming from that direction as well.

As the witch raced through the night sky chasing after the demon summoner, she thought back to the incident from a few weeks earlier.

Much as on the night of the Farsas attack, Tinasha gave chase to the elusive mage. Previously, the witch had worried she'd strayed too far from the castle, and the summoner had slipped away at that moment.

Tonight would be different. Tinasha had no intention of letting this meddlesome woman escape.

"*Bind, O ring,*" Tinasha intoned, quickly hurling a spell toward the woman ahead of her. A net of silver threads flew out into the sky to snare the runaway. With her path suddenly blocked, the woman was unable to stop and ran right into the web of magic. It instantly twined around her, binding her fast.

Tinasha teleported in front of the woman and studied her face. The young lady with green hair was someone she'd never laid eyes on before. Tinasha crossed her arms in midair and asked, "What do you want?"

The woman's red lips split into a smile. "I'm here on my master's orders…"

Evidently, the culprit didn't plan to answer further. Her attitude was defiant, and Tinasha responded haughtily, "Who is your master?"

"Nobody."

"Then you'll die here," the witch decided, stretching out her right hand. Power gathered there.

It wasn't a complicated spell. It was simply a gathering of enough strength to obliterate enemies.

Faced with certain death, the green-haired woman only gave a thin smile. Tinasha hurled the attack at her without any further word.

Just as the spell threatened to consume the woman, a transportation array opened up before her.

Neither Tinasha nor her captive had cast it—someone on the other side of the net had.

A man with a sword at his hip darted out of the array behind her, grabbed her in his arms, and slid back into the portal.

It closed in a flash. Tinasha cried out at the absurdity of the situation, "What just happened?!"

The power, its target now lost, raced through the night sky. Tinasha hurried to stop it, but the energy struck something and dispersed.

A man was floating there. "Are you trying to start a fight?"

It was Travis, scowling unhappily after having blocked the witch's attack.

Tinasha felt utterly deflated. "What are you doing here?" she inquired helplessly.

"I was pursuing a man who teleported away. He damn well tried to kill Aurelia. I won't have him underestimating me," Travis stated, his tone infused with murderous energy.

The witch shrugged. People could always be more coolheaded whenever someone angrier than they showed up. Tinasha's hair was coming down, and she undid the ribbon tying it up. "Is she all right?"

"I erected a barrier, and I have people assigned to her. What are you doing in that skimpy getup anyway?" he asked, and Tinasha looked down at what she was wearing.

Color drained from her face. "H-he's going to kill me…"

As she shook with fear, Travis eyed her unsympathetically, then let out a little laugh as if that had cheered him up a bit.

When Tinasha got back to the room, she dressed as she listened to Oscar's endless lecturing. She had nothing to say for herself: She'd shaken off his attempts to stop her, chased after the culprit, and *still* let her get away. She nodded to his criticisms like a bird at a birdbath.

Once Oscar had voiced all the censure he could think of, he dropped a hand on top of the witch's head. She was now fully and appropriately dressed. "The prime minister of Gandona was killed. There are other casualties, too. Now that you're back, the king of Gandona wants to ask you some questions."

"Ooh, I don't have a good feeling about that," remarked Tinasha.

"Neither do I," Oscar admitted grimly.

They could more or less imagine what she was going to be questioned about.

When Oscar, Als, and a very penitent witch were shown into the ballroom, all the dead bodies were gone. The only reminders of the gruesome attack were the bits of broken glass and bloodstains all about the place.

The king of Gandona stood in the middle of the room, his face ashen. When he saw Oscar, he spread his arms open slightly. "I'm sorry to call you here at such a late hour."

"It's an emergency. An awful thing has happened. What did you want to discuss?" inquired Tinasha with a bow from her place next to Oscar.

Fear and loathing filled the king's eyes as he took in how beautiful she was. "According to the surviving magistrates, the woman who did this summoned the demons in reaction to some critical words that Nellechi…our late prime minister had to say about witches. Therefore, I'd like to ask you where you were when that occurred."

"I was in the king's guest chambers," Tinasha responded, gazing back evenly at the king of Gandona with her dark eyes.

Oscar took over for her. "That woman sent demons our way, too, after that. I sensed the summoner there in the hallway, and I believe your soldiers can confirm that Tinasha was in my room before that."

"Yes, we've heard those reports. But witches have underlings, no? Couldn't those beasts have come your way to deflect suspicion? Nearly twenty of our people are now dead, but there are no dead on your side."

Als wanted to protest that there had been more Gandonans to begin with, but he held his tongue.

Oscar and Tinasha were silent, so the king pressed his accusations. “Where did you disappear to after the attack? Were you receiving a report from your subordinate on how your scheme went?”

“I chased after the summoner. However, I wasn’t able to capture them, and they got away…,” Tinasha admitted.

“I don’t suppose you have any witnesses?” the king demanded.

“I saw it,” chimed a newcomer, immediately drawing all eyes. Their gazes converged on Travis and Aurelia.

Aurelia looked stiff, and Travis had an arm wrapped around her shoulders as he turned to face the king of Gandona properly. “An assassin broke into Aurelia’s estate. I think it must have happened right around the same time as the castle attack. I pursued the man responsible and ran into Tinasha as she was chasing the female assassin. The two killers must have been working as a team and escaped together.”

“…I see,” said the king of Gandona, his face pinched.

The king had never much cared for Travis or Aurelia.

Aurelia, his older sister’s granddaughter, possessed strange powers of intuition. In many instances, it was like she had read someone’s mind. She’d been that way since she was a child, and everyone found it unnerving; her parents had rarely returned home.

After Aurelia’s parents perished in an accident, Travis conspicuously appeared to take over the role of her guardian. Travis, for his part, was an enigma unto himself. He had appeared upon the death of a duke thought to have no children with proof that he was the man’s biological son. Just like that, he was granted the social standing and position of his late father.

From there, his gorgeous looks and fluid tongue won him the support of the ladies of Gandona, though quite a few people were wary of his unwavering smile.

Both Travis and Aurelia were exceedingly clever, probably much more so than the king of Gandona and his two children. Quite possibly, it was only a matter of time before the country fell under their thumb. Such misgivings beset the king.

The king eyed the group sullenly but ultimately bowed his head to Oscar and Tinasha, murmuring, “I’m sorry I doubted you,” as he backed down.
“You should be thanking me for saving you,” said Travis.

“…Thank you,” replied Tinasha reluctantly.

They had all retired to Aurelia’s estate near the castle and were having tea. The area all around Oscar’s guest chambers had broken windows and doors as a result of the fight with the demons, rendering it entirely unusable.

By all rights, the king of Gandona should have offered them new quarters, but he was tongue-tied after the awkwardness created by

suspecting Tinasha. So Aurelia had suggested that they come to her estate instead.

As part of security, Als was patrolling outside the estate with the soldiers, so it was just Oscar, Tinasha, Aurelia, and Travis who sat down for tea. After Oscar stared at Travis with keen interest, now that he knew he was the highest-ranking demon, he tore his gaze away to pat Tinasha on the head. “Everyone ends up suspecting you, so you can’t run off and disappear. And if you have to go, make sure you take down the enemy.”

“I really felt confident that I would… But because I went, I found out what they’re after.”

“Oh yeah? Did you recognize them?” Oscar inquired.

“I don’t know the woman. I think she’s a half-spirit of some kind? She didn’t seem like a pure mage. But I am familiar with the man Travis was chasing,” Tinasha said, looking up at the demon. He met her gaze with an unhappy look.

Both seemed reluctant to talk, and silence reigned for a while. Then Aurelia slapped Travis on the back. “Well, what is it? If you know something, spit it out!”

“I don’t want to say,” he replied.

“I don’t, either. To see if we’re thinking of the same person, maybe we should say it together…,” suggested Tinasha.

The demon king and the witch exchanged glances, opened their mouths to speak, and said the same name:

“Leonora.”

They both had the same hunch. With it confirmed, a wave of exhaustion overcame the pair. Travis insisted that a girl Aurelia’s age should be asleep by now and sent her off to bed. Though Aurelia made a sour, disgruntled face, she obeyed.

Once Travis returned, having made sure to shut the door to the girl’s room, Oscar asked the witch, “So who’s Leonora?”

“She’s the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned…,” responded Tinasha.

“A witch!” cried Oscar.

“The man is Unai, a swordsman and right-hand man to Leonora. Now that we know she’s pulling the strings, we also know why she targeted you and Aurelia,” said Tinasha.

“Why me? I have nothing to do with her,” remarked Oscar, frowning.

Travis rested his chin on one hand and answered, “Because Leonora hates Tinasha.”

“No, you’re the one she hates! Didn’t you dump her in the worst way?” Tinasha fired back, affronted.

“I’ve forgotten all about that woman,” Travis said blithely, avoiding the question.

As Oscar listened to their back-and-forth, reality finally dawned on him. Simply put, these two had incurred the personal enmity of the Witch Who

Cannot Be Summoned, and so she had gone after the people each of them cared about.

It was very likely that Travis's past with Leonora was why he had no interest in witches now.

"Anyway, I don't ever want to see her again, so you go and kill her," decided the demon king, as if it wouldn't be a big deal.

Tinasha glared at him. "I'd love to, but I have no clue where she went."

"She's in Yarda. Word is, she's in good with the prince," Travis revealed. Oscar and the witch exchanged glances upon learning that.

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The next day, once Oscar was back in Farsas, he summoned Als and Kumu to his study to discuss this new witch.

Once he'd heard everything, Kumu let out a deep sigh. "Why must it be another witch…?"

"Is she the one who attacked the castle a few weeks back?" Als asked.

From her place next to Oscar, Tinasha nodded. "Yes. We can say that for certain now. Using alkakia is also very much something she'd do."

"Does that mean she's signed a contract with the prince of Yarda?" Als asked.

"No, the only witches who use contracts are the Witch of the Water and me. Leonora… Well, not many people know about this, but she's a witch who feeds off of countries," explained Tinasha.

Oscar's eyebrows rose at that. He pulled his lover onto his lap and stared at her. "What do you mean by that? I thought witches didn't interfere with nations and wars."

"Ostensibly, yes, but Leonora is different. She doesn't want power. She likes to hover in the shadows and build up and destroy civilizations. She'll infiltrate the court as someone's mistress and manipulate people, all while using almost no magic. She doesn't employ a lot of potions, either… Instead, she's very good at taking people out with natural poisons," Tinasha detailed.

The three men fell silent. None of them had ever contemplated that such a witch could exist.

To the common person, a witch was a creature that brought calamity using powerful magic. It was beyond typical thinking to think that a witch could corrupt a country without casting a spell.

"She has…a certain strange charm that attracts people, I guess you could say. She's rare among the witches in that she works side by side with most of her underlings, and it's easy for her to worm her way into royal and noble circles."

"Does she control people's hearts with magic?" Oscar asked.

"No, that's more Lucrezia's area of expertise. Leonora doesn't use magic, just her innate charm. She's accomplished when it comes to summoning and physical manipulation…healing and transmutation. I think

she’s probably the only person in history to summon the highest-ranking demon.”

“Do you mean that guy?” Oscar inquired, referring to Travis.

“Correct. It sounds like a lot happened, but I never asked because I wasn’t interested,” she said with a grimace.

“Just to clarify, can we trust him? The info he gave us isn’t a trap, right?” Oscar asked.

“I don’t think we need to worry… He has no reason to deceive me. You saw it—he really seems to care about Aurelia. I do wonder what kind of lightning struck that brute of a man to make him like that, but I don’t think he’d go making me his enemy in the midst of all that.”

Kumu picked up his king’s line of questioning. “But on the other hand, isn’t it possible that the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned is tricking *him*?”

“I don’t think that’s likely, either. Travis is a superhuman master of wiles. So is Leonora, but he’s probably better. That’s why she’s sending out demons to harass him instead,” Tinasha surmised.

“I bet you’re not very good at dealing with types like that,” Oscar commented.

“I can do it if I have to! I’ve been a prime minister under contracts lots of times!” Tinasha protested.

“Your backstory really is fascinating…,” Oscar mused.

He’d thought her high aptitude for carrying out official duties was due to being raised as someone who might become queen, but evidently, that wasn’t the full story.

Now that the information was all verified, Kumu had another question. “So we know that the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned is a master at summoning. Miss Tinasha, you also control the mystical spirits. Are your two skills so different?”

“I didn’t summon the spirits—only inherited them. It might be impossible for me to summon a demon like that from scratch. And in the attack on Farsas, Leonora cast spells to corrode my wards and summon demons. However, she didn’t make an appearance herself—she only sent her underlings. It would’ve been a much closer fight if she’d shown her face…”

When Tinasha said that, all the blood drained from Kumu’s and Als’s faces.

That night, Oscar had very nearly died. If another witch had appeared during the attack, the castle could very well have fallen.

As they realized all over again just how dangerous witches were, Tinasha snapped her fingers lightly. “Leonora hasn’t made any sort of direct appearance in over two centuries, but she got her hands pretty dirty during the Dark Age. She’s probably killed the most people out of the five of us. There’s even a story about the keep she sealed off in a solid block of amber.”

“You mean the Amber Castle? That really happened?” Oscar questioned, recalling the picture book of fairy tales he’d read as a child.

The story told of a palace deep in a forest that people were forbidden to enter. A giant block of amber encased the structure, and those caught within didn't know they were dead and went about their lives.

Tinasha nodded bitterly. "It really happened, though it was before I was born. The story goes, 'The Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned changed a castle into a gem and carried it off.' It was a bit too big for her to lift, though. She probably just smashed it apart. I doubt it still exists."

"So she's the very picture of a storybook witch. That's funny," commented Oscar.

Leonora was closest to the image most humans would come up with when they pictured a witch.

Tinasha shook her head in exasperation at how Oscar didn't seem worried at all. "You should be more on guard against her. In the past, Leonora fought the bearer of Akashia and won."

"What? I've never heard that before. There's no records of such a thing," retorted Oscar.

"That's not surprising. It wasn't the king who fought her, but a direct descendent in the royal line who borrowed Akashia and tried to slay her. However, Leonora overpowered him in one-on-one combat. Apparently, Akashia was only returned to Farsas because Lucrezia intervened," Tinasha explained.

"Why do all of you just keep popping up in all these wild stories…?" Oscar muttered.

"Maybe it's because we've lived so much longer than you," quipped Tinasha tartly, resettling herself on Oscar's lap.

Oscar caught up her braid in his fingers. "So does that mean you think I'd lose, too?"

"Not at all. There's no swordsman more powerful than you," she said, displaying her pride in how she'd trained him and her trust in him above all else. Tinasha hugged her knees to her chest. "But back then, Leonora didn't have all of her underlings. It'll be a bit more difficult to engage her in a one-on-one duel compared to how it was then. I'm probably the best match for her."

Tinasha's point-blank assertion left a heavy silence in the room.

As Oscar pondered over how they should handle this opponent now that they knew just how powerful she was, Tinasha looked up at him. "I'll go out and kill her, then."

"No," Oscar stated flatly.

"I won't get caught," appended Tinasha.

"You're forbidden from any sort of acting alone," Oscar decreed, and Tinasha hung her head, stung by his lack of trust in her. Yet when she thought about past events, it was no wonder.

As he rifled through documents, Als put in his thoughts. "Yarda is the real victim this time around. The Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned is surely behind their civil unrest. Once that's done, she'll head for Farsas or

Gandona… So in that case, why don't we make contact with forces that oppose the prince of Yarda while we can?"

"I see," said Oscar, making to fold his arms but realizing he couldn't because Tinasha was on his lap. Instead, he rested his chin on her head. He closed his eyes and sorted through his mind. "The missing princess might know something."

With that, he issued a few orders to the other three in the chamber. Als and Kumu nodded and left the room.

When Oscar and Tinasha were left alone, he stroked her neck and asked her something that was bothering him. "So why does the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned hate you?"

"I'm really not sure… We've only fought once. Maybe I shouldn't have called her a parasite."

"You sure do know how to insult people sometimes…," Oscar murmured.

"She called me all kinds of things, too. I was just dishing it back to her," Tinasha retorted matter-of-factly, though a scornful smile appeared on her lovely face. She seemed genuinely angry about the situation, likely taking into consideration the attack on Farsas, too.

As a witch's glint came into Tinasha's eyes, Oscar frowned at her. "Don't go off and do anything rash. You're not a spirit sorcerer anymore."

"I can still use spiritual magic! I've adjusted all my spells, too!" she objected, kicking her legs from atop his lap.

However, Oscar gave her a severe and quelling look, and Tinasha quieted right down. He smoothed down her hair carefully. "You weakened your power because you didn't care if you couldn't fight anymore. Just let me handle it."

"…I can do it. It's not solely because of my spiritual magic that I'm regarded as the strongest witch. If you let me take care of things, we can wrap this up quickly and neatly," Tinasha boasted, a little embarrassed but still defiant. Her pride was bleeding through. She clearly had no intention of admitting that she'd lost some power because she'd fallen in love.

Oscar remained resolute. "No. You can't act alone. I don't like the idea of waiting for you. You said she has servants, right? What if something happens?"

Tinasha turned back to face him, then took his face in her hands. Then she floated up into the air until she was upside down. Her ebon eyes gazed at him with all the depths of the abyss.

Tinasha smiled. Her smile had all the beauty of a sharpened and whetted blade.

"I will *not* allow anyone who tried to kill you to live."

Murderous intent took shape in her voice, and Oscar shuddered.

Tinasha didn't have a jealous heart.

That was an unconscious defense mechanism to keep her from killing the one she loved. The deeper her love ran, the sharper her urge to kill was. He contemplated the bottomlessness of that abyss.

Someday, her blade might turn to kill him.

A vision of that suddenly flashed through his mind.

But even so, Oscar had no plan of letting go of the witch’s hand now that he’d taken it.

6. Sandcastle

It was nearly impossible to see even one's hand before one's face in the sandstorm.

The man on horseback peered out from the cloth wrapped around his head at a raging whirlwind of white sand. He said to his companion riding next to him, "This is ridiculous… Is it always like this?"

The other man gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. "It shouldn't be… There's clearly something wrong."

"Dammit. Do you think we can reach the fortress of Cados?"

"If we can't, we're goners for sure."

Despite the life-or-death situation, the two exchanged casual remarks.

Suddenly, a girl's voice cut in. "I'll block the sandstorm for you."

As she spoke, the sandstorm stopped swirling around them. Their vision cleared, revealing a vast desert of white sand.

"Come on, get going now!" she urged from behind.

"What a slave driver…," muttered Doan despondently as he readjusted his grip on the reins. General Galen winced and followed after him.

Five days earlier, the two men had entered Yarda as travelers.

They'd departed from the fortress of Minnedart, crossed into Yarda, and followed the border toward Gandona. Along the way, they had passed numerous big cities and asked about the state of affairs in Yarda and where the missing princess had gone.

They'd learned that investigations were underway in all four corners and that the king of Yarda was bedridden. The prime minister, Zisis, was running the government. However, rumor had it that Prince Savas and his supporters opposed Zisis, and the court was divided.

On the other hand, the missing princess, Nephelli, did not belong to either side and had been trying to mediate.

"Both the prime minister and the prince are mobilizing troops. I guess they're preparing for a civil war," Galen stated calmly.

In contrast, Doan flashed a sardonic smile. "If it were only a civil war, they could do whatever they wanted. If they're going to come at us, too,

then we've got no choice but to get involved. Plus, Miss Tinasha is all bent out of shape."

"I guess she'll kill the enemy witch and settle all this one way or another," surmised Galen.

"If she doesn't, all we can do is fight them head-on," Doan said dryly.

Yarda had lost to Farsas eleven years ago and had relinquished half its territory as a result. That portion of land stretched from the fortress of Minnedart to eastern Farsas. If things came to blows again, the whole country of Yarda might go under. Galen mused on the fate of their neighbor state.

Behind the two men on horseback rode a young redheaded girl of about ten years old.

Despite her young age, she had striking looks and a cold expression. The crimson-eyed girl wasn't human. She was one of the mystical spirits belonging to Tinasha.

To avoid alerting Yarda to what they were doing, only two men had set out on this reconnaissance mission, but a spirit was assigned to them to guarantee their safety. Her name was Mila, and she often complained about anything particularly irksome to deal with. Despite that, she was helping.

Protected by the sandstorm-repelling barrier, the three made their way to the fortress of Cados in western Yarda. According to eyewitness testimony they'd obtained, the mage assigned to the missing princess had come that way.

Judging by the map, the fortress wasn't too far off now, so long as the sandstorm didn't slow them down. Worried for his horse as it marched through the hot sand, Doan looked up. Far in the distance, he could barely make out the vague shape of a huge stone building.

"We're here…," he murmured, turning to look back.

Galen gave him a wan smile, and Mila just stared back at him, unimpressed.

As the structure became clearer, Galen checked on his sword and started to look worried. "Will it be all right for us to drop in? Won't they think we're suspicious?"

"We can just say we're lost travelers. It's completely plausible that we would be. And if anything happens, Miss Tinasha will open up a transportation array and bring us back," Doan explained.

"Don't cause our queen any trouble. If that happens, just resign yourselves to dying a noble death," said Mila.

"……"

Is she really here to ensure our safety? Galen wondered doubtfully. However, he decided not to think about it too deeply.

The group of three brought their horses to the gate. Though it was a fortress, there weren't any guards or watchmen. Galen shouted loud enough to be heard inside the garrison, "Is anyone there?"

His cry echoed off the high walls. Had it reached the inside? After a while, hurried footfalls came from the other side of the gate.

Tensing, Doan and Galen watched as the entrance opened. The soldiers inside cried out in amazement at the sight of three new faces. “How did you get here?!” one exclaimed.

“What?” they responded, exchanging glances.

Doan, Galen, and Mila had been met not with vigilance and hostility, but rather with pure shock.

After a simple pat-down, the three travelers were granted entry.

Galen wore his sword, but that was deemed appropriate for a wanderer’s self-defense.

Unfortunately, Mila’s mood took a sharp nosedive over her being touched by humans. The two men walking ahead of her prayed they wouldn’t be casualties of her temper.

One man led the trio to a room where Yardan general Iosef, mage Gait, and military officer Neona were waiting.

Iosef was a robust fellow in his midthirties with dark skin adorned by crisscrossing old scars.

Gait was a young man with a sharp gaze and possibly the one who acted as the princess’s bodyguard.

Lastly, there was Neona. The young woman had long blond hair—a rarity in Yarda—that was braided up in a bun. She would probably be lovely if she smiled, but at the moment, she was giving the new guests a hard stare.

With a good-natured grin, Iosef ushered them to sit down. Once all were seated, he said, “Well now, you really are lucky. We had a sudden sandstorm come on about a week ago. We’ve been stuck here. It’s quite the predicament.”

Galen spoke up as the group’s representative. “Are these storms common?”

“Not at all. It might be hard to believe, but while these parts were never all that hospitable, it only really became a desert last week.”

Galen’s and Doan’s jaws dropped. They were both in their twenties and hadn’t taken part in the war eleven years ago. What they knew of Yarda came from books and simple maps; they had no idea this had initially been anything but what it was now.

Iosef gave a derisive laugh. “So you see, though you came here seeking refuge, we’re essentially stuck in lockdown.”

Doan raised his hand at that. “Can mages not teleport out?”

The mage Gait snorted. “This wasteland…desert…has a barrier up around it. We can’t do any direct teleportation. In case you’re wondering, we weren’t the ones to put that in place. Someone’s keeping us locked up here.”

“Oh…,” sighed Doan, restraining the urge to tear out his hair.

He had felt a little prickle when they’d entered the desert, but he would never have thought there was a barrier up around the entire thing. He

glanced back to see Mila sitting there with her legs crossed, looking like this wasn't her problem at all. She must have known but hadn't said anything. Perhaps because she was a demon, she didn't care about anyone but her.

So long as the trio was tasked with this mission, they couldn't just give up.

Doan changed his mindset and started to probe carefully into what had happened to understand the circumstances better. "So you think someone deliberately sealed this place off?"

"Seems that way," Gait admitted resentfully.

Doan pressed further. "We've actually come from Gandona… Is it true that the princess of Yarda went missing?"

"……"

The three Yardans present blanched.

Yarda had given no official announcement regarding Princess Nephelli's disappearance.

For all most citizens of Yarda knew, she was still in the castle. The only ones who knew the truth were a few people in Gandona and those who got their information from there.

The Yardans exchanged grim looks. Suddenly, Iosef let out a sigh. "Who knows…? It's hard to say. I've also heard the rumors that Her Highness isn't in the castle. Things have been bizarre lately, and I don't have too good an idea of what's going on, either… Ah, I shouldn't have said that to you. Sorry."

Iosef was going to be much more challenging to deal with than they'd thought.

Pasting on a meek expression, Doan nodded.

Gait's presence suggested that the Yardans in the fortress knew where the princess was. Yet Iosef blended some truths and acted friendly to cover it up.

Doan shot a glance at Galen. He nodded in reply.

Their goal wasn't just to investigate. If possible, they wanted to take the initiative and help resolve Yarda's troubles—that was their real purpose here. Doan had been granted that power.

He sat up straight. Gazing evenly at Iosef, then at Gait, he asked, "Do you know who has locked you up here?"

They didn't answer, just sat there silently and sullenly. That was answer enough. It was apparent that they did know, but refused to say.

Mila stared at them with condescension. Doan got to his feet and walked over to stand before the three Yardans. He made his voice as calm and even as possible. "If you know who it is, and you want to defeat them, we will help you. Our king has asked as much of us."

The last sentence made Iosef look up. He gazed at Doan with shock in his eyes. "Where did you…?"

“We have come here on behalf of the king of Farsas, Oscar Lyeth Increatos Loz Farsas. Right now, your country is at a crossroads. I urge you to choose wisely.”

At those words, Neona finally lifted her lovely face after looking down this entire time.

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According to Iosef and Gait, Princess Nephelli had sensed that a strange woman—a lover of her older brother, Savas—was interfering behind the scenes in the court rupture. Initially, when the king fell ill and Prime Minister Zisis took over, Savas had been against it. Unfortunately, he lacked the drive and power to oppose the prime minister outright.

That was when a beautiful woman appeared and began to offer advice to Savas.

Her suggestions were spot on, and Savas quickly garnered enough support to oppose Zisis. During that time, Nephelli felt concerned but supported her brother. However, one day Savas said, “Once I reclaim our nation, we’ll take back the land we lost to Farsas.” This shocked her; her brother had changed so much he was like an entirely different person.

Yet Yarda was already at the height of an internal rift. The country was falling apart. If it dared to challenge Farsas after only just managing to heal itself, Yarda would be wiped off the map forever.

Desperately, Nephelli tried to dissuade her elder sibling. However, not only did Savas brush her aside, but he also tried to imprison her. The big brother who was always so sweet to her no longer existed.

Driven into a corner, Nephelli announced that she would be attending the Founding Day ball in Gandona and left the castle, intending to flee. She planned to leave Yarda, then plead for help in another country where she had relatives.

Unfortunately, just before she reached the border, her pursuers caught up with her. Upon learning of the ambush, Nephelli’s party changed course and fled to the fortress of Cados, where they quickly found themselves trapped.

“The enchantress in the castle is taking every opportunity to fill Prince Savas’s mind with doomed ambitions. ‘Reclaim your country, take on the world.’ Some people in Zisis’s faction have been killed, and it’s only a matter of time before he marshals troops. It’s embarrassing, but civil war looks to be unavoidable the way things are going,” confessed Iosef, his voice laden with anguish. Though it wasn’t their country, Galen and Doan looked sympathetic.

This had been caused by a witch whose favorite pastime was raising and destroying countries. Whether Savas won or lost, she’d still have had her fun. In the past, she’d undoubtedly incited the triumphs and collapses of

other countries, though always making sure that she herself never made an appearance in the history books.

“So then, where is the princess now?” Doan inquired.

“Well… In all the confusion as we headed to the fortress, I got separated from the other guards. I still don’t know where she is. Because of the sandstorm, we can’t go out and search for her…”

“What…?” said the two men of Farsas, astonished.

In the end, the princess really was missing.

Even if they could sway the people in the fortress to their side, the party from Farsas doubted they could successfully intervene in Yarda’s affairs without the princess. From where Farsas stood, this was another country’s problem, and they couldn’t take any action unless they won over someone in Yarda’s royal family.

Doan hesitated, unsure of himself. Should they search for the princess or abandon the stronghold and pursue another lead? Keeping a cool head, Doan thought for a while about which method would be the best one.

Just then, Neona spoke up for the first time. “Even if Her Highness isn’t here, the fact that this fortress is locked up means that her pursuers think she is.”

“Are you telling us to make use of that?” questioned Doan.

“We’ll go out and search for her once the storm dies down, so until then, we should pretend that she’s sick and laid up in bed. This should deter those after her, at least for a time.”

“…I see.”

This was a pretty shrewd woman to take advantage of the princess’s absence. Doan was impressed, finding the plan not bad at all. He nodded and said, “Then let’s go with that.”

Neona looked relieved.

Now that they understood things a little better and had the support of the fortress’s leaders, Doan sucked in another deep breath. “Now, how are we going to get this information back to Farsas with the teleport block in place?”

“Don’t tell me we have to ride home through the desert…,” Galen groaned, looking discouraged at the thought.

“I don’t want to. It’d be a pain,” Mila stated, voice dripping with scorn.

“What other choice is there?” Doan wondered.

“Can’t we just send the message directly? Lady Tinasha, did you hear that?”

“I did,” answered a familiar voice into the room. Doan and Galen looked surprised; so did the three Yardans, who did not recognize the voice.

The space next to Mila began to warp. A beautiful black-haired woman appeared there out of thin air. As she ran her fingers through her hair, she bowed to the three people before her. “I watched and listened through Mila’s eyes and ears. I’m sorry to seem like I was eavesdropping.”

“Who are you…?”

“That’s not important. I’ve made the king aware of everything. In about an hour, he’ll reach a stopping place in his work and then finalize the details. Doan, Galen, do you want to head back for now? You’ve done well,” she said, issuing instructions briskly. The three Yardans were speechless.

Doan and Galen felt comforted to have the witch intervene. Mila floated into the air and happily threw her arms around her queen’s neck. “Lady Tinasha, was I useful?”

“You truly were. Thank you, Mila,” answered Tinasha.

“Call on me anytime! I’ll do a much better job than Nil!” the little girl declared.

“Yes, yes,” replied Tinasha with a little smile. Mila disappeared with an enthusiastic wave good-bye.

Doan muttered wearily, “She acts completely different toward us…”

Tinasha heard him and burst out laughing.

One hour later, Oscar teleported into the fortress as promised with the witch and two of his advisers in tow.

As before, it was Iosef, Gait, and Neona who welcomed them.

After Iosef greeted them, Oscar got right to the point and stated, “The first thing I’d like to say is that we don’t plan to publicize the fact that Farsas intervened here. We’d like you to abide by that as well.”

“Understood.”

“And unfortunately, while the princess may be missing, we can’t guarantee that we can keep her safe. We’re only going to be excising the woman filling the prince’s head with nonsense.”

“That would be enough,” Iosef responded immediately, bowing his head. Never had he expected help to come from Farsas. Even if the type of support it offered was minimal, that was more than welcome if it led to a breakthrough in the current predicament.

However, there was one thing he was still curious about.

Why were they helping *now*? If Oscar just stood by and watched the civil war unfold, he could nab Yarda once the dust settled.

When Iosef inquired about that in a roundabout manner, a dauntless smile flickered across the handsome face of the king of Farsas. “Because she provoked us first. And…if we’re up against a witch, it seems only natural that I be the one to handle it, right?”

The raven-haired woman next to the king smiled, her eyes narrowing into crescents.

That was when the Cados trio realized that the one driving everyone into this situation was one of the five witches in the world.

Astonished, Neona murmured, “Wh-why would a witch…”

“Who knows? As her name would imply, the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned appears even when none seek her out. It’s pointless to think about the reason. The answer is plain bad luck,” replied the beautiful woman.

While the trio of Yardans was still mute with shock, the king of Farsas said, “Now then, how should we lure Leonora out…?”

He placed a hand to his chin and looked around the room. From left to right, Neona, Gait, Iosef, Als, Kumu, and Tinasha all wore different expressions. As he examined their faces, something occurred to him. “Why doesn’t Leonora kill Princess Nephelli?”

With a witch’s power, it seemed like it would be simpler to destroy the whole fortress than to maintain a sandstorm. There had to be a reason she was going to such trouble.

It was Gait who spoke up. “When Princess Nephelli departed the castle, she received the royal ring from His Majesty. It’s also a key that unlocks the temple where the coronation is held.”

“So that means Savas can’t become the next ruler unless he has that ring?” Oscar asked.

“That’s right,” responded Gait.

Oscar puzzled over that. With the princess bound by such circumstances, that meant her disappearance ill befit Leonora’s designs. It was better to pretend that the princess was safe than let word get out and have things escalate unpredictably.

“Then we just need to make it look like we’re interfering in the capture of the princess. So long as the prince and the prime minister are in a standoff, neither side can risk sending troops, so Leonora will have to come herself,” concluded Oscar.

“Oh, I’m planning to make extra sure that she does. She has a very short temper. It’ll almost be too easy,” Tinasha remarked blithely, as if she herself weren’t just as short tempered.

Oscar gave a light pat to the witch’s head. “How long will it take to get ready?”

“Once I undo the sandstorm, Leonora will be alerted to our meddling, so before I do, I’m going to cast a spell to prevent any demon summoning in this entire region… I have a lot to do, and it’ll take about two full days. On the third, I’ll end the sandstorm and draw her out. Since she’s gone to the trouble of making this place so inaccessible, I believe this is as suitable a place as any to kill her,” Tinasha declared calmly, appearing both lovely and cruel.

There were only five witches in all the land. Yet she held not the slightest hesitation about slaying one of her own. Her smile was the very picture of composure, overpowering the others into silence.

Only Oscar nodded readily. “Got it. I don’t want another castle to get attacked. What do you need?”

“I’ll borrow some people and get to work. On the night of the second day, I’ll come to find you. Just go about your usual work,” Tinasha instructed.

Oscar nodded, then pinched her ear with a frown. “Don’t go rogue on me, understand?”

“What are you talking about?” Tinasha asked, averting her eyes.

Oscar tugged on her ear harder. “If you do something and don’t tell me about it, I’m going to hang you upside down.”

“……”

Tinasha squeezed her eyes tight unhappily, then stuck her tongue out once he wasn’t looking.

Watching the display, Als and Kumu felt headaches coming on.

After Oscar returned to Farsas, Tinasha called on four mystical spirits and left to go check on the spell in the desert. Als had Iosef show him around the fortress so he could review how it was laid out. Kumu stood atop the fortress ramparts and used a spirit to communicate with Tinasha.

Neona was in a daze as the preparations got underway. She stared outside from a corridor in the fortress. Her eyes followed the raging, perpetual whirling sand that kept them trapped.

Just like a storm, she mused, thinking about the people from Farsas who had descended so suddenly upon the garrison.

In particular, Neona found herself quite taken with the brashly confident king. She’d heard tales of him for a long time now—stories of the handsome royal whose swordsmanship was second to none. Many people made their high regard for him known, even beyond Farsas’s borders.

Now, Neona understood that his charm was far more than skin deep. It was the strength of his soul and how radiant it was. His eyes were arresting, compelling. It was an unwavering gaze that tempted Neona to submit.

Never had she expected to meet him, yet now she had. She wondered if this was what Prince Savas felt like, ensnared by the witch?

They had met only once and hadn’t exchanged any words; Neona knew this was ridiculous. However, she quickly realized that as she gazed out at the sandstorm, she was chasing her few memories of him.

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“Leonora… Where are you?”

“I’m here,” replied a languid woman’s voice.

The sun was still high, but the curtains were drawn in the room, and it was dark inside.

Leonora sat up in bed. Her honey-colored hair cascaded down her back in loose waves. Her eyes were as green as a forest canopy that blotted out all light. With her elegant nose and rosy lips, she appeared as one would picture a holy saint.

She was as gorgeous as a flower in full bloom, brushing back her long hair. A man peeked in from a crack in the door. “Were you asleep? I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. What’s going on?” she inquired, smiling wide at him.

The expression was very reassuring to the young man, who entered and sat next to her on the bed. “Zisis is gathering up the generals he has on his side. I think he may finally be about to marshal troops.”

“I see… That’s nothing to fret over. You’re the rightful heir to the throne. Simply judge him guilty of treason.”

“But I’m not the king. If Nephelli isn’t here…”

“It’s fine. Things will go our way soon enough. Trust me, Savas,” the witch cooed, laying one ivory hand along the man’s cheek.

He nodded hazily, like he was in a dream. After Leonora gave him a set of instructions, he departed to ensure that his troops would be ready to go at any time.

Once he had slipped out the door, Leonora sniggered. “What a weakling…”

Despite being the crown prince, he couldn’t decide on anything himself. If not for Leonora, Yarda would have already fallen into Zisis’s hands.

But she didn’t mind. She’d had more than enough of strong and arrogant men. Being toyed with was no fun. The witch much preferred to be the one doing the toying. All the people in the world were nothing more than her adorable pawns to play with as she pleased.

Leonora got out of bed and let out a little yawn. Then she heard one of her followers say, “Lady Leonora, the demons you sent after Lord Travis were all killed.”

“I see. Forget about that for now.”

“The Witch of the Azure Moon isn’t in Farsas Castle.”

“Oh?”

Now, that was unusual. Had something happened for her to leave her contract holder behind even though they knew they had enemies?

Leonora could not believe that Tinasha had chosen a man like that.

Personally, Leonora found the idea of a partner of equal level detestable. Particularly if that person bore Akashia. Wasn’t it the height of absurdity for Tinasha to be with a human who could kill her?

Nonetheless, Tinasha was an ex-royal herself. Maybe it had gotten hard for her to live alone. Leonora remembered the scrawny girl she’d once known, and she snorted.

Such an impertinent woman. Tinasha was a witch of a completely different sort from Leonora. She drew people to her with a different light.

That luminance could stand to dim a bit. Leonora didn’t hate Tinasha. She just didn’t care for her.

Besides, how funny would it be if Tinasha died—or if she lost the love of her life? Leonora was growing excited over the mere idea. It would be a new game.

An enchanting smile curving across her lips, the witch gave her followers a new command.

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Once Oscar returned to the castle, he tried to get as far ahead on his work as he could.

Because Farsas's involvement was a secret, he had to select whom he would bring with him carefully. Tinasha planned to deploy all of her mystical spirits, but they would be up against a witch. When facing someone who'd slaughtered thousands during the Dark Age, Farsas would need to be just as thoroughly prepared.

The king's witch hadn't wanted him involved, but no matter where this all had started, it was Oscar who had been targeted and had nearly perished. There were casualties from the attack on Farsas, too, so he intended to make sure the same thing would never happen again by taking action to bring down Leonora.

"Still, she sure is fierce about this…"

Tinasha hadn't wanted to provoke the other witch who'd threatened Oscar, the Witch of Silence who'd cursed him. But she'd jumped straight to plotting murder when it was Leonora. Maybe it was because Oscar had suffered direct harm; even so, her reaction was bloodthirsty. But based on how Tinasha spoke of her, perhaps she just plain didn't like Leonora.

As Oscar pondered that, he headed for his chambers along with some guard soldiers. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a beautiful raven-haired woman perched on the edge of a window in the hallway. The soldiers on either side of him headed for her and bowed.

"Tinasha, what is it?" he asked.

"I wanted to see you… Can I not?" she answered.

"I don't mind, but are things okay over there?"

"Everything's fine," the witch replied with a grin, jumping down from the window. She ran up to Oscar, and he stroked her hair before dismissing the guards.

Once they were in his room, the witch reached out both arms and hugged him tightly. He smiled and lifted her up, then set her down on the wide bed. He sat next to her as she looked up at him with wide, fawning eyes.

As Oscar gazed at her, he grabbed her slender wrist. At the same time, there was a metallic clinking sound. She turned her head to see what was on her wrist, but Oscar caught hold of her chin.

In a low voice, he said, "I kept this around in case I needed to punish her. Seems like it came in handy in a different way."

"…Oscar?" Tinasha questioned.

"Don't call me that. I don't know who you are, but do you really think I can't tell the difference between the woman I love and an impostor?"

"……"

A tremble of fear ran through the faker. Oscar leveled a cold glare at her.

She tried to cast a spell to escape but realized she couldn't focus on her magic. Oscar was holding her head in place, so she couldn't see it, but the

item locked on her wrist had to be a sealing ornament made of the same material as Akashia.

“I’m uncomfortable with that disguise, so first I’ll ask you to remove it,” Oscar stated with a voice that brooked no argument.

The woman gulped nervously. The air was fraught with such tension that he was likely to snap her neck if she refused. She focused and drew on power that wasn’t magic. Her black hair changed to a glossy green, and her dark eyes took on that same verdant shade. The vibrant hue immediately made it plain that this was no ordinary human.

Oscar scowled. “So you’re the woman who summoned the demons. Tinasha did mention you looked half-spirit.”

Only her lips curled up in a smirk. When Oscar saw the derision there, he brought the hand that was on her chin to her throat. “Tell me your name.”

“…Aderayya.”

“Why are you here?”

“My master ordered me to.”

“Leonora, huh? I don’t think much of her taste,” Oscar spat.

In a bid to maintain some of her pride, Aderayya kept silent and only smiled at him. Death felt imminent, and her body had gone cold. It wasn’t entirely because her magic was sealed. After facing him up close, she knew how powerful this man was. Her master had instructed her: *“Kill him with an internal poison if possible.”* But even if he hadn’t possessed Tinasha’s protective barrier, she didn’t think she could overpower him at close range.

Oscar spent a while staring down at the pale-faced creature beneath him before he finally smirked. “Are you important to Leonora?”

She knew what he meant and gasped out, “I-I’m like trash to her.”

“Oh yeah? Well, whatever,” he said casually, strengthening his hold on her neck. He pressed down on her carotid, and her eyes bulged.

Several seconds later, Oscar went out into the corridor to find a mage, dragging the woman’s unconscious body behind him.

Tinasha worked late into the night to get halfway through the spell, then paused her work there and spent the night in the fortress. While she was known to be the strongest witch, she didn’t intend to overestimate her own abilities. She wanted to be scrupulous in her preparations. However, even that wouldn’t be enough when facing a fellow witch. There was also the fact that out of all five of the witches, Leonora was the second oldest, after Lucrezia. Purely as a mage, her wealth of experience was different.

“Well, even so, I’m going to win,” murmured Tinasha placidly as she gazed out from the corridor windows at the morning sun shining down on the desert.

A spell banning any demon summoning in the entire region was an absolute necessity when facing Leonora. If it collapsed, everything would fall apart. That would only lead to a war of attrition as Leonora summoned an inexhaustible supply of demons.

That was why it was so convenient to have this desert. Yet she still felt a twinge of uncertainty.

"What is it that's got me anxious?"

Tinasha knew that the region had initially been a barren wilderness even before the recent transformation into a desert. For ages, it was only stark earth with no vegetation, just like Old Tuldarr. That was probably because a small amount of magic had accumulated here. While it was nothing compared to the amount in the now-diverted magical lakes, there were several power spots like this all over. Tinasha wondered if Leonora had buried this place in the sand so quickly so she could draw on that magic undisturbed.

Even that didn't seem to explain the woman's niggling discomfort.

"I do hope we're not in proximity to another god or something…"

The last one had been an incredible nuisance, but she didn't think there were too many beings like that lying around.

The witch would have liked to get to the bottom of this odd sense of doubt had time permitted, but her first priority was ensuring Leonora didn't get wise.

Tinasha tamped down her malaise for now and kicked off from the hallway to leap into the air.

After working all morning, she finally finished and called over Als and Meredina, who had arrived that afternoon. Last night, she'd arranged a transportation array linking the fortress and Farsas Castle. But to be absolutely safe, its use was limited to citizens of Farsas.

On a desk, Tinasha laid out the twenty or so swords she'd brought from her tower and pointed to them. "Take whichever sword you like. They're not as strong as Akashia, but they're all first-rate blades."

Meredina's jaw dropped, and she gaped at the witch. "What? I can really take one?"

"Of course."

"These are…magic swords, right?"

"You'll probably be fighting demons, so yes. I picked out ones that are excellent at killing such things."

Gingerly, Als picked up the nearest blade. A dragon decorated the hilt; he unsheathed the weapon, and it glinted blue.

"Wow," he commented, eyes sparkling as he inspected one sword after another until finding the perfect ones for himself and Meredina. With their chosen weapons in hand, they faced the witch with openly emotional gazes.

"Thank you very much!" they said in unison.

"It's partially due to me that you're even in this fight, so there's no need for gratitude," Tinasha dismissed with a self-deprecating smile. With a wave of her hand, the unselected blades vanished. She let down her hair and checked the time. "All right, I'm going to return to the castle for a bit."

"Are you going to go call over His Majesty already?"

“No. I’m going to get permission to make the first move…,” she replied with a mischievous grin before she transported herself away.
She teleported to the study first, but no one was there. Cocking her head in puzzlement, she headed out into the hallway. She looked to her right and saw Lazar passing right by.

Tinasha gave him a light wave. “Um, do you know where Oscar is?”

“He’s in the third lecture hall. He caught an enemy mage last night.”

“Huh? What happened?” Tinasha inquired, taken aback by the unexpected turn of events. She thanked Lazar before winking out of sight.

Oscar, Kav, and Renart were looking over a green-haired woman bound to a chair.

No sooner did Tinasha appear in the room than her eyes went wide. She knew this prisoner.

Oscar turned back to her. “Oh, you’ve come at a good time.”

“What in the world happened?” the witch asked.

“She snuck in very brazenly, so I captured her,” he answered.

Tinasha noticed that the woman had Sekta on her wrist. A wave of repulsive memories flashed through her mind, and she felt a little sympathetic. Dismissing the unpleasant recollection, the witch focused on the matter at hand.

“She’s the one who’s come at a good time. This is a lucky break—it saves me the trouble of going to catch her,” stated Tinasha.

“Oh yeah? We’re having trouble dealing with her. She won’t talk, so I was thinking of throwing her in a well,” retorted Oscar dryly.

“Then you’d ruin a perfectly good well,” Tinasha shot back, making a face. She came to stand in front of the woman, bending down to look her in the eye. The woman smirked at her. It may have been just a bold front, but her guts impressed the witch. “What’s her name?”

“Aderayya, apparently,” Oscar replied.

“That’s a nice name. Now, Aderayya, I’d like you to tell me in detail about the layout of Yarda Castle and the current state of affairs there,” Tinasha requested with all the imposing majesty of a queen.

Aderayya gave a cynical sneer. “Didn’t you hear them? I’m not giving anything up.”

“I think you will,” Tinasha said, and she held out a hand. A tiny bottle of transparent liquid appeared in her palm. She grabbed it and gave it a little shake to check the contents.

“Here we go,” the witch muttered. One glance at Aderayya made the white flesh of her arm split open in a cut. Red blood welled up and began to ooze out. Tinasha opened the bottle and let little beads of the liquid within dribble out onto the wound as she hummed an incantation. From the cut, the droplets entered Aderayya’s body. Once Tinasha had made sure of that, she sealed the wound.

Aderayya’s face was frozen with nervous tension, but she still looked up haughtily and declared, “Potions won’t work on me.”

“They don’t work on me, either, but there are exceptions. This is a truth serum concocted by Lucrezia, the Witch of the Forbidden Forest,” the witch revealed, which made the blood drain from Aderayya’s face. Naturally, one of Leonora’s servants knew the name of the woman who was second to none when it came to potions.

Oscar examined the little bottle, which was still over half-full. “Why do you have something like that?”

“Lucrezia gave it to me and told me to use it on you if you cheat,” Tinasha answered.

“…I’m not going to,” he said.

“Tell Lucrezia that,” she quipped back primly.

Oscar’s expression soured, and he fell silent. Renart stifled a smile behind him.

Kav looked interested in Lucrezia’s concoction, murmuring, “I could find a use for a bit of that.”

About thirty minutes later, Tinasha had extracted just about all the information they needed on Yarda from Aderayya.

Arms crossed, Tinasha made up her mind about what to do next and looked to Oscar. “I’ll be going to Yarda for a bit now.”

“Did I hear you wrong?” asked Oscar.

“Ow! Ow!” cried Tinasha, fighting back as the king pressed his fists against her temples.

After a moment, Oscar released her from his vise and shot a chilly glance at her. “Did you not understand what I said to you?”

“I did. But Yarda is on the brink of civil war. Even if I kill Leonora, we may not be able to stop the conflict immediately—or it may start before I can get her out of the picture. That’s why I need to delay things a little,” Tinasha explained.

“There’s no need for you to go that far. It’s too much meddling,” Oscar chided, standing firm.

“Can’t you just let me do this? It’ll be fine. Plus, it would be prudent to thin the numbers of Leonora’s servants in advance,” Tinasha asserted.

“That sounds like something that would make her aware of your involvement.”

“I can take them out one by one without leaving a trace. That’s how different our power levels are. She broke into the castle. I’m merely repaying the favor,” Tinasha wheedled.

“Listen…,” Oscar began, exasperated.

“I won’t speak to Leonora. I’m just going to stir things up a bit,” she insisted.

A brief silence fell.

Oscar had a strange sense of déjà vu; this all felt a lot like the time Tinasha went to slay the demonic beast. Back then, he had concerns, but in the end, he had watched her go.

Now he was king, and he bit back a sigh. “…You’ll come right back?”

“I’ll return in two hours, and then I’ll come to get you. Can I go?” Tinasha requested again, looking up at Oscar with her dark eyes.

He stared into them for a while before sighing and patting her head. “Go.”

When the witch heard that, she gave a soft smile. Her trust in him was evident on her face, reflecting his own confidence in her.

The witch conjured a long-distance transportation array. Turning to her attendant, she said, “Renart, you come, too. We’ve got a lot to do.”

“Yes, my lady,” replied Renart, and the two mages disappeared into the transportation spell together.

The king turned back to face Aderayya.

She was still drugged; her green eyes were clouded over and cast down at the floor, unmoving. After a moment of contemplation, Oscar asked her, “Why does Leonora dislike Tinasha?”

The inquiry had been born of pure curiosity. A moment later, Aderayya murmured feebly, “Because of Gaweid’s betrayal.”

Oscar ruminated on that.

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“We’ll take the king into custody tonight,” declared Zisis, and his three generals nodded.

The longer a civil war persisted, the more Yarda would suffer. He needed to settle this as soon as possible. He would respect the king’s authority, but only by making him a figurehead.

For better or worse, Savas didn’t have any aptitude for running a country. In addition, it was obvious what would happen now that he was under the thumb of that serpent-tongued Leonora. Zisis needed to do whatever he could to prevent Savas from inheriting the throne.

Savas needed Nephelli to be crowned, and she was currently missing. Zisis’s plan was to secure the king, immobilize Savas, and then search for the princess.

The prime minister surveyed his generals. “Prince Savas’s private army is expected to march soon. Take them down.”

“Yes, sir.”

“…Actually, I was hoping you might delay that,” remarked an unfamiliar man. Whoever had spoken wasn’t in the room, and all present jumped to their feet.

The one who had interrupted was standing in the doorway. His appearance suggested that he was a mage—a rather brazen one.

It was unacceptable that some unknown interloper could infiltrate this meeting of utmost secrecy to discuss overthrowing the country.

The three generals exchanged glances—then immediately drew their swords and charged at the man. Unconcerned, he wove up a spell with a brief incantation.

Just as their swords rose to cut him down, a transportation portal opened up right before them.

The array gave a sizable shudder before swallowing up the three generals.

Astonished at the sudden disappearance of his comrades, Zisis cried, “Wh-what do you think you’re doing? What happened?”

“I just tossed them somewhere suitably far away, as my queen desired,” Renart responded, putting out a hand. In response, the portal changed shape, its tip edging closer to Zisis. Though the prime minister tried to escape, he too found himself drawn into the spell.

A gray stone corridor.

It seemed like it would go on forever and looked identical to hallways found in any castle.

Maria, dressed as a lady-in-waiting, walked down this unexceptional corridor carrying a pitcher of water for the king.

About half a year earlier, she had come to this country on the orders of her master, Leonora.

At one time, Maria had been a court mage of Cezar, but she grew bored with her trouble-free life and quit her job to become a wanderer. During her travels, she came into contact with Leonora, one of only five witches in all the land. She was calamity in human form. Strong, beautiful, proud…and pandering to no one.

The witch was cruel, yet sensitive. Maria was drawn to her immediately. She felt that Leonora could overthrow everything. Thus she begged the witch to take her along.

And Leonora obliged, giving Maria the life she’d hoped for.

It was Maria’s first time watching a country crumble away before her eyes. She smiled as she watched the castle slowly lose its luster. She envisioned a future when it would all be covered in flames and blood—

Suddenly, a black shadow appeared at the end of the hallway, abruptly curtailing the woman’s musings. “What…?”

As she blinked, wondering if her mind had played tricks on her, the shadow slithered closer.

Eyes formed from shards of night.

A woman so lovely she could be an embodiment of beauty was staring at Maria from very close. She had arrived out of thin air, and her long onyx locks and black mage’s attire gave off a sense of otherworldliness.

Unlike her master, who mesmerized everything only to burn it away, this woman’s ebon eyes drew all around her into an infinite abyss.

The woman in black didn’t smile as she reached out a hand to Maria. “Do you have any last words?”

Maria didn’t realize these were her final moments. All she could comprehend was that the creature before her was an opponent.

Reflexively, she cast an attack spell. She lifted her right arm high to lob it at the woman—

“Ah!”

Yet to her surprise, the limb had already been severed at the elbow. The flesh was charred.

As the woman brandished a burning sword, she warned Maria, “If you don’t have any, you’ll leave nothing behind.”

However, by the time she heard the statement, her vision had gone black. Maria vanished from the world without so much as a drop of blood left behind.

Having neatly eliminated all her targets, Tinasha glanced at the water pitcher she was now holding and teleported away again.

Not many people in the castle noticed the change.

If they did, they mistook it for the type of transition they had been expecting. The court of Yarda had been touch and go for so long that a considerable number of people just thought the time for the anticipated upset had arrived.

Only those of the inner circle recognized the strangeness for what it was. The crown prince Savas was one such person. He stalked down the castle hallways, his irritation on full display. “What in the world is going on…? Where did everyone go?”

For quite a while now, he’d been trying to assemble his generals and mages so he could instruct them on how best to strike out at Zisis. To his anger, however, none answered his summons, no matter how long he waited. He’d given up and gone to find them himself but couldn’t locate a single one.

Savas hadn’t the faintest notion of what his followers were doing during such a crucial time. In the end, he couldn’t rely on anyone but Leonora—others were useless.

Savas reached the office of the royal chief mage—one of his allies—and threw the door open. The chamber’s occupant turned around. “Come in.”

When Savas got a proper look at the one who had spoken, he briefly lost the power of speech.

In the royal chief mage’s stead stood a devastatingly beautiful woman.

The black-haired vixen smiled and pointed behind Savas. “Close the door.”

“Uh, all right…,” he agreed, rushing to obey. Entirely overpowered, he turned back to face her. “Who are you?”

“Your sister asked me to come,” she responded.

“Wha…? Do you know where Nephelli is?!”

“I do. But I’m not going to tell you, Your Highness,” she said.

“I’m her brother!” he protested.

“You were up until a little while ago, yes,” she shot back scathingly, and Savas reddened. He wanted to defend himself with an excuse but used his minuscule self-respect to hold it back.

The woman sat on the desk and folded her legs. The skin peeking out from under the hem was alarmingly white.

Her dark eyes flashed up at him. “Do you want the throne? Or even greater power?”

“The throne! The rights I deserve! If Zisis hadn’t gone and made all this trouble…”

“You could have built a better nation?” she asked.

“Of course! I’m royalty,” he insisted.

“Have you done the work for that?” inquired the woman, gazing at him coldly. This unknown beauty’s words made his head feel hot. Before Savas could say anything, she continued in a sharp tone. “The nation is not an instrument of the king’s authority. Both king and country are institutions made by the people to protect the people. Those who do not understand that are not fit or qualified to run a country.”

“I know that!” Savas cried.

“I hope you do,” she replied, gazing at him so steadily that her jet-black eyes threatened to peer into his soul. An uncomfortable jolt ran through his body.

Her eyes held a strange power. She was terrifying.

Savas feared that if he looked upon her for too long, he’d reveal something he ought not to.

Unfortunately, she wouldn’t let him look away. Her cold eyes bored into his as she overwhelmed him with pressure. “Maybe you should take a better look around. The people you’re trying to kill and the ones trying to kill you are all your citizens. If you don’t protect them, who will? Your woman only sees them as pawns.”

“Leonora’s done nothing wrong!” he protested.

“I didn’t say she has. All I’m saying is that your positions are different. She’ll use every trick in the book. Whom do you think you’re going to kill by leaving what *you* should decide and what *you* should do up to someone else?” the woman asked, hitting him with a direct question that left Savas speechless.

The prince knew that he’d never decided a thing on his own and that a war for the crown was about to break out. All the tragedy stemmed from Savas’s own weakness.

“You think you’re so clever… What do you know?” he muttered.

“Certainly nothing about you. But you’re not the only one who owes a debt to their country,” the woman answered smoothly. It sounded as if she was obligated to a nation of her own or was very close to someone who was.

Feeling frustrated, Savas curled his hands into fists. The beauty stared at him, her gaze unreadable. If he met those eyes, he’d be drawn into the abyss. It was dizzying, like peering into a full-length mirror in a room at night.

One of Savas’s hands reached for the sword at his hip. “…Leave now, unless you wish me to cut you down.”

“I certainly don’t. I’d get quite an earful if I killed you,” the woman replied.

“What?” the prince said dumbly, unable to immediately comprehend what she meant. Her gaze remained even.

Anger and threats didn’t get through to her; nothing did. It was like Savas was suddenly standing trial.

The aura wrapped about her tore apart his bluffs. His face began to show signs of the very indecisiveness he had pretended not to see.

It wasn’t that Savas didn’t have regrets. He wasn’t ignorant of his own incompetence. Even so, the man was a royal. He might be a foolish one, but his sovereignty was a fact.

Yet did his natural-born privilege justify mass death?

Savas seized up, and the room went silent.

The woman did not take this chance to attack, even though Savas was frozen in hesitation, nor did she offer him any words. All she did was face him, staring with eyes that knew all but seemed unfettered by anything. It was only natural that the woman kept quiet. She wasn’t Yardan royalty. Just like Leonora, she had no direct stake in this fight.

Which was why…Savas alone had to be the one to decide.

Abruptly, he wilted. Softly, he admitted, “…There’s nothing I can do to stop it now…”

He was past the point of no return in his feud with Zisis, and the troops were about to sortie. If Savas didn’t strike, the other side would.

At this, the woman gave a wry smile. “Nothing has even begun yet. It’s not impossible to turn back. You just need to swallow your pride a little. Can you do that?”

She hopped down from the desk and walked over to Savas, reaching out an ivory hand and touching his cheek.

Her fingers felt warm and soft.

The heat seeped down into the prince, and he felt like crying. He thought of the face of his late mother.

“…Can I really make it in time?”

“If time is what you need, I’ll give you some,” replied the woman, and she smiled. Her voice was gentle.

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The setting sun lent a glimmer to the whirling sandstorm.

Accompanied by mystical spirits, Tinasha did a final check of her spell and placed a camouflage over the entire thing so it would be undetectable. An average mage wouldn’t even be able to see the magic, though it was unclear whether another witch would.

Even so, it was leagues better to have it than not. Tinasha nodded approvingly at the spellwork, then drifted slowly through the air before landing on an outdoor walk. Oscar was already there waiting for her, with Gait and Neona next to him.

Oscar patted her head. “How is it?”

“It’ll do. If I make the magic too strong, it might ward them off. There’s actually a lot I’m not happy with about the spell’s construction, but I settled for some compromises,” Tinasha answered.

“I see,” said Oscar.

The witch gave a little yawn. She didn’t feel tired when focused on her work, but now that she’d stopped, she was tremendously sleepy. Perhaps that was her delicate body’s reaction to wielding such powerful magic.

Oscar rubbed her head. “How did it go in Yarda?”

“I threw out almost all of the key people involved in the infighting to various places near the border. I’ve sealed off the mages’ powers, so they won’t be able to get back right away. I also put laxatives in the water supply so the army can’t fight.”

“Every trick in the book, huh…?” Oscar remarked.

Tinasha’s tactics seemed pretty vulgar. However, she fended off Oscar’s comment apathetically. “I talked a little bit with Prince Savas. He seems to regret how things turned out, so that should give us a bit of time. Also, the king was drugged by a magic potion, so I cured him. A full recovery will take a while, but he’s not confined to his bed anymore.”

“What’s this about His Majesty?!” cried Gait in shock.

Pale faced, Neona pressed a hand to her lips. “He was drugged? I had no idea.”

“When you consider the timing of the first dose, it seems possible that Zisis was the initial culprit. One of Leonora’s minions definitely took over at some point, though. The potion isn’t all that potent, but over time it gradually robs you of your strength,” the witch explained calmly.

Neona grew agitated and cried out, “If you figured that out, then why didn’t you bring His Majesty with you?! Won’t it be even more dangerous for him if the witch learns he’s recovered?!”

Neona motioned as if to reach out and grab hold of Tinasha, but the witch remained unruffled. “Prince Savas told me he’d care for the king himself. There would be repercussions later if Leonora learned that your ruler fled the castle during this time of emergency. The king himself acknowledged this. Surely he can bear it for a day,” Tinasha answered sternly, and Neona was left with nothing to say.

Tinasha was right. A king’s fleeing a castle was tantamount to his surrendering it.

Neona was unable to offer an objection. Oscar looked down at her and said coldly, “It was her meddling that allowed us to slow down the internal conflict in Yarda. Didn’t I warn you at the start that this was all we intended to do?”

“…I’m very sorry,” Neona apologized, reddening and bowing her head before practically bolting away. Gait followed her.

Oscar and Tinasha were left alone on the walkway, and the latter let out a little sigh.

“Ugh. This is why I told you not to do anything unnecessary,” grumbled Oscar.

“It’s nothing a witch can’t clean up later,” Tinasha replied, floating into the air and winding her arms around his neck. She was cuddling up to him like a cat, and he grinned.

When Tinasha acted this way, she seemed like any other innocent girl, though she wasn’t the type to show just anyone unconditional kindness. The witch was tough on royals, undoubtedly due to her origins.

Suddenly, Oscar remembered what he’d heard from Aderayya. “Is Gaweid the name of a person or a place?”

“Oh, there’s a name I haven’t heard in forever. What’s going on?” Tinasha inquired, her eyes wide. Oscar explained things to her.

Now abreast of the situation, Tinasha dropped back down to the cobblestones. Her expression turned blank, and a shadow clouded her downcast eyes. “I didn’t think that bothered Leonora.”

“Was that when you two had your duel?” Oscar asked.

“No, that was much later… Gaweid was the name of a Tayiri king.”

Oscar’s eyebrows rose in surprise. Tayiri was the nation that hated mages. What kind of relationship could the master of such a place have had with a witch? He was curious but didn’t know if he should ask.

Tinasha shook her head with a faint smile. “It’s nothing too serious. At least, not for me.”

The pair set off along the walkway together. As the Yardan soldiers they passed turned their heads to look back at them, Tinasha recounted the story in dribs and drabs. “This occurred shortly after I had become a witch. At the time, Gaweid and Leonora were lovers—of a sort anyway. They weren’t *in* love. It’s more accurate to say that they were trying to control each other. Leonora wanted to mess with the nation that hated magic, and Gaweid wished to feel that he’d made the mages surrender by controlling a witch.”

“That’s stupid,” Oscar stated frankly.

The witch gave a pained smile. “And then I appeared on the scene… I was a singer in Tayiri when Leonora caught on to what I really was. She told Gaweid about me.”

“So he switched his focus to you?”

“Urgh… That’s a very blunt way of putting it, but in effect, that is what happened. When Gaweid heard that I had nearly been the queen of Tuldarr, he tried to make me his mistress. At the time, Tuldarr had just fallen, and guesses as to the reason were on everyone’s lips. Gaweid was trying to give other nations the impression that Tayiri had destroyed Tuldarr by making me his mistress,” Tinasha continued.

“What the hell? I’ve never heard something so ridiculous,” Oscar muttered, irritated. Even if rulers used dumb, cheap tricks to raise their country’s prestige, it was all a meaningless facade in the end. What did this king expect to accomplish with pride built on a foundation of lies? It boggled the mind.

A sarcastic smile crossed Tinasha's lovely features. "Back then, I really wasn't more than thirteen years old. The advances were very unwanted. Naturally, I left Tayiri immediately. Gaweid…ended up dying under suspicious circumstances later."

"And that's why Leonora has a grudge against you? It sounds like she's just taking her anger out on you," Oscar concluded.

"That's not all it is… Fundamentally, we don't get along. I know she simply doesn't like me," Tinasha said.

"So she sends out demons to attack you, all because she doesn't like you?" Oscar asked skeptically.

"That's what witches do. Have you forgotten?" questioned Tinasha, floating up and kissing his cheek.

There was a wry glint in those dark eyes.

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She dreamed.

It was a vision of a day long past, when she was still a child.

"Come here, Sister!" cried the younger twin from the middle of a prettily manicured garden, waving her arm enthusiastically.

That was how their playtime always started. This was a memory of heartbreakingly halcyon days.

"They really look exactly alike. I'm thrilled our girls are so close, darling," said the mother to her husband.

"They're both the apple of my eye, my dear lady," he replied.

She was the daughter of a local lord, and she spent her childhood happily at a castle in the middle of a forest with her affectionate parents and twin sister.

That life changed in an instant when someone broke into her home for a secret attack.

Snow drifted lazily down from the sky on a silent eve.

The intruder crept into the castle and murdered her parents as they slept. She was thrown out, alone and on the verge of death, into the dark woods.

"Save me, Elou…"

Her twin was nowhere to be found. For the first time in her life, she was alone.

The bleeding wouldn't stop, and it was terribly cold. At some point, she collapsed in the snow.

The poor child couldn't even guess why something so awful had happened to her.

By all rights, she should have died. Before she could, however, an elderly half-spirit woman rescued her.

In a cabin deep in the forest, she learned magic while working as the old lady's servant.

It was all people could do to stay alive amid sudden upheavals. Thus it never occurred to the poor child that she would ever experience more hatred and pain than she had on that snowy night.

"…Sister…"

Leonora's own whisper pulled her back to consciousness. She awoke in a dark room.

As she glanced around, she remembered she was in her chamber at Yarda Castle. Leonora sat up in bed slowly, pressing a hand to her head. She was still slightly addled. "A dream…?"

Something told her she'd definitely had one, but she couldn't recall its contents.

For whatever reason, she'd been spending more and more time asleep the past few years. Maybe it was because her games didn't delight her as they used to. If she was going to do something boring, she might as well dream when she had the chance.

That was why she came to countries, planted her seeds, wound the springs, and went to sleep. She wouldn't watch from the sidelines as her machinations proceeded as she had arranged. The witch was interested in observing only once everything started to draw to a close.

As Leonora was a witch, she had plenty of time, and she was not given to fussing over minor details.

Occasionally, however, she mused, Maybe I've grown tired of the world.

Wherever she went, it was all the same.

From the dawn of time to the Dark Age to the Age of Witches, names changed, but events remained repetitious. People lived like fools, and then they died. Nothing the slightest bit electrifying ever occurred.

Despite that, the idea that she had lived too long was unappealing to Leonora.

She wanted to exist, so she did. The witch harbored no regrets about that, nor did she desire to go back to how things used to be at any point.

Leonora got out of bed and headed out into the hall, long white gown trailing behind her. "Savas?"

Hadn't he gone to ready the troops for deployment? It was strange that he hadn't hurried back to report to her. Had something happened?

"Maria? Are you there?"

Ordinarily, the witch's servant would appear instantly, but today she didn't. Puzzled, Leonora shook her head. She still felt sluggish; the fog of sleep refused to dissipate from her head. Memories drifted heavily about her mind. It was difficult to recall when she'd last seen Maria.

"Laketh? Mizha? Aderayya?" Leonora called. Her voice resounded through the corridor but went unanswered. She sighed and gave up, returning to her room.

When the witch glanced out the window and saw an azure moon hanging in the night sky, she scowled reflexively.

There was another of her kind who had taken the name of that pale sphere for her own. The youngest of the witches—the one Leonora disliked the most.

When Leonora had first met her, the other woman was but a child. The last queen of the fallen Magic Empire was standing in the midst of a crowd, her dark eyes flashing with hatred for mortals.

That sort of expression was unsuitable for a witch.

Whatever suffering that girl had endured, she *had* endured it and managed to become a witch. She should forget all about her misanthropy and have fun. Nothing good would come of letting resentment control her. Leonora knew that firsthand.

Leonora had revealed Tinasha to Gaweid on a whim, and while she was angry to be cast aside, it was nothing more than that.

Still, if she had to pick a time when something flared up inside her, it may have been when Gaweid looked at that skinny, lonely girl and said, “I like her eyes.”

Those words would come to haunt Leonora.

Those eyes. An abyss filled with hatred and hunger for revenge. The very same emotions that Leonora had finally let go of amid much agony.

Even at a young age, that witch contained such terrible suffering, but unlike Leonora she had managed to remain placid.

That was the sort of person Tinasha was, and it attracted people.

She was different from Leonora, who was a prisoner to sinister feelings that had warped into something ugly.

Leonora cast off her resentment and pasted on a smile to charm people, but Tinasha actually used the glimmer of her anger to fascinate.

“…Detestable woman.”

Leonora hated her. She still did, even though the resentment had faded from Tinasha’s eyes.

Unable to shake off the exhaustion clinging to her, Leonora sat down on the bed. “Unai, come here.”

Unai was her right-hand man, the one she trusted above all others and who had served her the longest.

This time, the witch’s request was answered. A tall man with dark skin appeared, carrying a slightly curved longsword. Once, his hair and eyes had been brown, but they had changed to deep crimson when Leonora gave him power.

Seeing his face, she broke into a smile. He knelt before her. “Have you called for me, Lady Leonora?”

“Has anything happened?” she asked.

“As you ordered, I have been in Gandona. Nothing has occurred.”

“Ah, I see…,” Leonora replied. She had forgotten about that. The woman felt as if she’d been left behind. A sort of shapeless anxiety was settling inside her body.

Unai poured a glass of water from a pitcher and offered it to his lady, who looked pallid. “Are you tired? You should lie down for a bit.”

“I just woke up, though…,” Leonora explained with a pained smile. Still, she obeyed and reclined after drinking some water. Her body sank into the bed, feeling oddly heavy. “Unai, stay with me until I fall asleep.”

“Yes, my lady,” he responded. The answer reassured her, and she closed her eyes.

She could rest a little more, just for tonight. And when she woke up, she’d do something more fun.

As a graceful smile played about the witch’s lips, she drifted off to sleep.

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While Leonora drifted into slumber, the fortress of Cados was still wrapped in a curtain of night.

In a council room, the king of Farsas, his closest circle of advisers, and the Yardan general and mages were doing a final confirmation of plans. Oscar, who was leading the meeting, turned back to the witch at his side. “Tinasha, how many people do you think we’re up against?”

“Hmm, I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. I took care of most of her followers that were in Yarda today. I actually do wish I’d done something about Unai, though,” the witch admitted, taking a sip of tea. Out of the corner of her eye, the sandstorm raged beyond the window. “Mages, I need to ask you to maintain the spell I’ve laid out over the entire desert. Once I engage Leonora, I won’t have any spare mental capacity for doing it myself. If I use sigils to draw a magic circle, she’ll find out immediately… I’m sorry for the oversight.”

All the mages in the room bowed their heads in assent.

Oscar picked up the fortress floor plans. “The officers and soldiers will defend the garrison. Tinasha, can your spirits handle her demons?”

“They’ve said they would, so I’m leaving that to them,” she answered.

“Leonora specializes in summoning magic, right?” Oscar recalled.

“She does, but there’s a spell banning all summoning set up around the fortress… Plus, we’ve got some help. The only high-ranking demons who would answer her call are those already under contract to serve her. So we’re putting pressure on them,” evasively explained the witch, mischief plain.

Oscar realized that Travis had to be involved. He must be the one causing trouble for Leonora’s demons. Evidently, the witch had made herself even more enemies before the battle began.

Tinasha flicked at the satin bow tied around a lock of her hair. “Even so, we won’t know if we can kill all the demons or not until things get started. It’ll be a lot for the generals to deal with.”

“We will do our best,” the Yardan soldiers replied.

The witch nodded, but there was still the faintest crease in her brow. Her dark eyes surveyed everyone in the room. “The Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned…Leonora. Unsurprisingly, her actions have made her the most hunted witch of all, but she’s managed to stay alive, eating away at new countries to her heart’s content. She’s underhanded, cunning, and dangerous. Please be careful.”

As this warning was coming from the most powerful witch, it was particularly galvanizing for everyone. Tinasha softened her expression and added, “I’ll disperse the sandstorm tomorrow morning. Even if it takes her some time to get ready once she notices…she’ll probably arrive sometime before the end of the day. If she doesn’t, I’ll take action.”

“Let’s hope she takes the bait, then,” stated Oscar calmly, drawing the meeting to a close.

With a historically unprecedented battle against a witch looming, there wasn’t a single person without worry.

However, those of Farsas still thought they would be able to manage because they had their king and his beloved witch on their side. They knew very well how powerful those two were. It was no exaggeration to call them the mightiest pair in all the land.

They filtered out of the room, trusting that everything would be over by the following night.

Once Tinasha returned to her room, she checked on the mystical spirits stationed around the fortress.

She’d placed them in battle positions in advance in case her infiltration of Yarda Castle was discovered, but at present, there were no signs that Leonora would be attacking sooner than anticipated.

After hearing from her spirits that nothing was out of order, Tinasha stepped away from the window. Oscar was sitting on the bed, polishing Akashia with a cloth. She sat down next to him.

“You’ve fought her once before, right? How did that go?” Oscar asked.

“I won. But…it was more like a draw due to injury. My second got seriously wounded,” Tinasha explained.

“Your second?”

“We fought a two-on-two duel. On her side was Unai…and on mine was the man who taught me to use a sword. They were roughly even when it came to skill, but Unai is virtually inhuman.”

“Inhuman? What do you mean?”

“Apparently, Leonora made him absorb a demon. So his physical abilities are a little strange,” she elaborated.

Oscar waved Akashia over a candle. After checking the blade’s sheen, he sheathed it. “I take it I’ll be up against him, then?”

“I think so,” Tinasha responded. She was in charge of this battle between witches.

Oscar gave a slight nod. “Relax. I’ll beat him—it won’t even be close.”

“Please do,” she urged, looking up at him with a smile. In her eyes was all the confidence of the most powerful witch.

Oscar glanced at her and set Akashia beside the bed. He pulled her into his arms, caught hold of her chin, and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

Tinasha accepted the kiss, her eyes closed, but once she realized his kisses and touches were moving slowly from her neck to go lower and lower, she blushed and pushed him away. “We can’t.”

“Why?”

“There’s a time and a place.”

“Understood,” he accepted, which relaxed Tinasha.

But in the very next moment, she found herself pushed back onto the bed, and her eyes grew wide. “You didn’t understand a thing!”

“It’s been so long since I’ve heard that from you.”

“Listen to what I’m saying!”

In a leisurely manner, he kissed from her neck down to her chest. His large hands gently caressed up her ivory legs. As she bore the tingly, hot sensations making her back arch and shudder, Tinasha reached out and pinched his ear. “What are you planning on doing if she shows up now?”

“If that happens, I’ll stop. But I’d regret it if I didn’t do this now and died tomorrow.”

“D-don’t say that! You’ll invite misfortune…”

The man really could make such mean jokes, even though he never once thought he’d lose.

Oscar looked up and smiled, then whispered in Tinasha’s ear. “Now that you understand…indulge me.”

“…I’m starting to really feel like blasting you away tomorrow during all the confusion…,” she muttered.

He didn’t appear nervous at all. Resisting him felt more and more ridiculous.

Tinasha gave up the fight, though she was struck with the strangest urge to burst out laughing. She wound her arms around his neck and hugged him tight enough to feel all of him.

The next morning, Tinasha stood on the ramparts. Oscar had needed to wake her up, and her eyes still looked bleary.

With her were the Yardan forces—wearing concerned expressions—and those from Farsas—with little smiles, as they understood why Tinasha was having a hard time getting out of bed lately. The witch lifted her arms to face the sandstorm.

“I command a transformation of the definition. I command the meaning to be lost. Should the cage become the world, the boundary shall reverse. Register my life as everything.”

From the witch’s hands, a spell teeming with magic spread like a spiderweb across the entire region.

It swelled up instantaneously before breaking away from her and dissolving into the sandstorm. Seconds after it disappeared, the storm calmed to nothing.

Little by little, visibility improved.

The white desert glittered under the sun's rays. Iosef and Neona gasped to see such gigantic dunes.

Tinasha covered her face with both hands and yawned. "That should do it… Okay. We've got at least an hour until Leonora gets here. That's if she's awake."

"Would she not notice it if she's asleep?" Oscar asked.

"Maybe…," Tinasha said, giving a lazy, drowsy answer.

In response, Oscar pressed his fists against her temples, and her eyes welled up with tears. "O-ow… I'm awake…"

"Go make sure you're fully awake before she gets here. Pamyra, I'm counting on you," Oscar ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied Pamyra, dragging Tinasha back inside the fortress as the witch rubbed at her eyes.

The Yardans watched her go with evident worry, but Oscar waved a dismissive hand. "She'll be fine. Also, we might have longer than an hour, so we don't all need to wait out here so intently. Split up into shifts," he instructed, and he went back inside. Kumu and Als started dividing up the remaining personnel.

Neona watched the king of Farsas disappear into the garrison and realized that she wanted to chase after him. She shook her head, tamping down her feelings.

Now wasn't the time for that. The very existence of her country hinged on this battle. She focused her energies on preparing herself mentally for what was to come.

Her hands curling into light fists, Neona, too, went back into the fortress to spend an hour waiting.

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The sound of something breaking echoed inside her head. Leonora looked up instinctively.

Not a moment earlier, she had been sound asleep. She barked out sharply, "Maria! Aderayya! Shink!"

The call resounded impotently. Leonora sifted through her memories. Hadn't she ordered Aderayya to go to Farsas?

"Don't tell me…"

She couldn't sense her followers' existences. Savas wasn't coming, either, and the sandstorm trapping the princess had dispersed.

It was obvious whose doing this was; no other could stand up to a witch.

The world turned red with Leonora's rage. Windowpanes in the room shattered one after another with violent crashes. The witch's shrill cry

smashed apart the shards of glass flying through the air into even smaller pieces. “UNAI!”

“I’m here,” he said, appearing and kneeling before her.

Leonora regarded him arrogantly. “I’m going to go and kill that woman. You will help me.”

“Yes, my lady,” he accepted.

Leonora narrowed her eyes, and a smile materialized on her crimson lips.

If *she* had dispelled the sandstorm, that meant she must be in the fortress. She’d barged in unaware that it was Leonora’s territory. How very foolish.

Though Leonora was taking the rare bit of initiative, this all fell within the realm of her expectations. After all, she’d elected from the very beginning to enjoy whatever happened.

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An hour remained until the expected arrival of the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned.

Neona practiced her sword form for a while in the fortress’s training area but couldn’t seem to calm herself. After some deliberation, she decided to take a bath to rinse off her sweat and soothe her tense mood.

While the sandstorm had everyone trapped, water had been a growing concern. Therefore, the fortress’s public baths had been closed, and people made do with sponge baths. However, when the party from Farsas arrived, that beautiful mage woman used magic to draw up water. Apparently, the nullification on transportation magic didn’t affect her at all. Those who reaped the benefits of her power felt grateful, but still apprehensive.

After undressing and slipping into the large main bathing room, Neona was shocked to catch sight of a black-haired woman through the steamy haze. She was sitting on the edge of the tub, facing away from Neona and soaking her legs in the water. Next to her was a clothed lady mage, who was combing out her master’s raven tresses. This attendant noticed Neona right away and looked up to give her a nod, but her lady showed no signs she was aware of the new bather.

Neona returned the nod, then moved to the edge of the tub some distance away from them and knelt there. As she ladled out water and poured it over herself, she watched the black-haired woman out of the corner of her eye. Her soft-looking creamy white skin glowed with an allure that could enthrall anyone, regardless of gender. She hadn’t introduced herself to Neona by name, but Neona knew this must be the witch.

If not, she couldn’t have undone Leonora’s magic as easily as she had. More than that, Neona had also heard the stories of the king of Farsas being infatuated with the witch he kept at his side.

Neona's heart ached to see that the witch's ivory skin was marred with deep, red scars in places. She meant to keep in mind that this beautiful witch was his paramour, but it was still hard to be in her presence.

Without thinking, Neona bit her lip, then realized that the witch had returned her gaze and was staring back at her. She must have noticed Neona peeking at her; Neona flushed with shame.

However, the witch only cocked her head in confusion. From behind, Pamyra whispered something. Tinasha listened, then covered her face with a hand and winced. "I'm so sorry…"

Instantly, the scars on her body all vanished. Neona gasped at the witch's magical prowess.

She hadn't even used an incantation. Her power was paramount. She was human, but also not.

The pale woman's ebon eyes reminded Neona of Leonora's green ones. She'd met the other witch only once, in Yarda Castle. It was evident that they both possessed irresistible charm.

And Neona herself had none of that power. She didn't have that sort of gaze.

Upon realizing as much, she felt intensely despondent and distressed. Emotions she couldn't suppress leaked out. "…Why are you with him? Are you controlling him just like the other does to Prince Savas?"

Once the question slipped free of her lips, she realized her indiscretion. The blood drained from her face. With her feelings all in a mess, she'd blurted out something she shouldn't have.

Neona was frozen stiff, but the witch didn't seem bothered at all. She gave a light smile. "Controlling him? He doesn't listen to a thing I say. I'm the one who's at his beck and call," she replied, dipping a hand in the water. Slowly, she drew it out. The liquid that should have dripped down stopped in midair instead, as if held up by some invisible hand, and formed a little tower of water.

But the witch spared only one glance at her delicate creation before demolishing it artlessly. Just as blithely, she asked Neona, "Do you desire him, Princess Nephelli?"

"…!"

Her heart felt like it stopped—both at what the witch asked and at the name she used.

Gasping, Neona asked, "H-how did you…?"

"It was very easy to deduce. You didn't object at all when I delayed ending the sandstorm. Any duty-bound servant would wish to end the storm and seek out their lady as swiftly as possible. Also, that bit about the princess having a ring needed for a coronation is a lie, isn't it? The true key is a magic sigil embedded in your body. I can tell just by looking," the witch answered with a smile.

Neona had nothing to say for herself. The witch had seen through everything.

Nephelli heaved a little sigh and straightened up. She gazed back evenly into the witch's eyes. Shining from her own was the certain majesty of someone raised as a princess. "Does he know…?"

"I haven't said anything, but he has good intuition. He may have realized."

"I see…," murmured the princess, her voice almost fading into the steam of the room.

Tinasha scooped up some water and rinsed her face. She whispered to Pamyra, who was awaiting orders behind her, "I feel alert now. I really have a hard time when other people wake me up… I should have slept alone."

"If you had, I would have come to rouse you," Pamyra pointed out.

"Urgh…," Tinasha mumbled, pushing back the inky black hair that had fallen in her face. When she glanced over, she saw that Nephelli was sitting on the edge of the same tub, staring down at her hands. Tinasha observed the face of this lovely princess.

If not for the interference of witches, Nephelli might have become queen of Farsas.

If the Witch of Silence hadn't placed a curse on Oscar.

If Tinasha hadn't become his protector.

If Leonora hadn't set her sights on Yarda.

The possibilities were endless.

People's fates were always unwieldy. And the witches who toyed with them were like deformations driven from the pages of history. They could not be like normal humans at all. The slightest of emotions or any capricious whim of theirs could change the fates of many. Tinasha herself hated that idea and wouldn't come into contact with anyone.

"A 'pitiful little girl,' huh…?"

Leonora had once mocked Tinasha with those words. Back when she'd hated people with everything in her body. Leonora had ridiculed Tinasha for her life of avoiding others.

And it was true.

At that time, she really had been just a little girl. She was afraid of people, didn't want any contact with them, and was ever consumed with anger. Even after Tinasha had managed to process those emotions, she'd built a tower for the express purpose of isolation.

The witch could have never imagined that anyone would show up and want her for herself—as a person.

"…He's beyond help."

Still, she was done waffling over the decision.

Tinasha remembered the look in Aurelia's eyes.

They had glimmered with a strong determination. That was someone whose spirit was a light burning bright within their fragile body.

Aware that she'd grown fraught with emotion, the witch breathed in deeply.

It would be all right.

She would stand up and face her.

Calmly, Tinasha let out an exhalation.

Nephelli struggled to work out whether she should say something or not after noticing that the witch had gotten to her feet and looked up.

While she'd worn a gentle smile a few moments ago, now her face was cold and shrewd. A chill ran up Nephelli's spine at the sight of it, despite the warm bathwater.

A basket of clothes appeared in Pamyra's hands. The witch retrieved her clothes and donned them, still dripping wet. Pamyra fastened the outfit tight around her.

Tinasha muttered indifferently, "One hour exactly. She must be pretty angry."

Pamyra nodded. Tinasha noted the gesture, then turned back to Nephelli and gave her a smile as beautiful as a flower in bloom. "I'll be off now."

With a light wave of her fingers, she disappeared.

Left behind, the princess stared in blank amazement at the spot where the witch had just been. She felt slightly neglected and greatly troubled.

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"You're late. At least dry your hair," chided Oscar, who had been gazing up at the sky from the ramparts when the witch teleported next to him. He gave her a dumbfounded look when he saw the state she was in.

"Sorry," she said, though it wasn't just her hair—she was wet all over. Droplets clung to her leg, visible through the high slit of her mage's attire. She may as well have just stepped out of the water.

However, Tinasha didn't seem bothered at all as she used her fingers to comb out her hair. At the same time, her black locks dried to a glossy sheen. All the dampness was drained away from her body.

For some time now, a series of explosions had been sounding in the east. A closer look revealed that a swarm of black dots was headed for the fortress. The mystical spirits were engaging the demons Leonora had summoned for battle.

Tinasha cupped a hand around her ear and then issued an order to a few of her spirits that weren't already embroiled in the fight. "Saiha, Nil, Itz, go to the east and help them out."

She listened for their acknowledgment and put her hand down.

Oscar looked around at his subjects, standing around him ready and waiting. "Remember what I said yesterday. Don't die. That would be ridiculous. Put your own life first. Als, I'll be going out with Tinasha, so you hold down the fort."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Als replied.

Looking up at the eastern sky, the witch grinned. "She's here."

Tinasha flung out her right hand gracefully, and a sword appeared in its waiting grasp.

Next to her, Oscar called the name of the dragon on his shoulder. It responded instantly and assumed its true size. Nark waited for him right outside the rampart, and Oscar crossed over the railing to leap onto the creature's back.

The young king turned and stretched out a hand to his protector. "Tinasha, if we win this fight…"

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

"…Yes, I will. Let's get married," she replied with a captivating smile, and she took his hand.

Oscar's eyes went wide. Tinasha tugged on his arm and used the force of that to leap onto the dragon's back so easily that one had to wonder if she weighed nothing at all.

Oscar patted her head. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course," she said.

On the ramparts, the people of Farsas watched them with expressions that were a blend of surprise and joy. Oscar gave his beautiful fiancée a faint smile. "I guess I can't afford to lose now."

"Were you planning to?" she teased.

Casting her long eyelashes down, Tinasha closed her eyes. Oscar could hear her drawing a deep breath.

When she opened them again, the darkness in those orbs blazed with the warlike gleam of someone at the precipice of battle. Her long black locks fluttered in the wind. A smile crept across her lips. "Come on, it's time for war."

"Let's go," Oscar said, and the red dragon rose into the air. The great creature circled slowly before vanishing into the east. Everyone left in the fortress watched them go with their hearts in their mouths.

As Nark zipped along through the air, it must have sensed the enemy. The farther they flew to the east, the more clearly they could see hordes of demons in the air. In the sunny sky, the mystical spirits' magic dispelled their gigantic fireballs.

Tinasha surmised the flow of battle and frowned. "There's too many of them. Defeating Leonora will end things faster than dealing with all this."

"You can disable my barrier if needed. Maintaining it uses some of your power, doesn't it?" offered Oscar.

"Mmmm… I guess I'll take you up on that…," said Tinasha, drawing blood from one of her index fingers. Then she rubbed it behind Oscar's ear. "There might be aftershocks from our magic, so don't be afraid to wipe the blood away and let me guard you."

"I'll be fine," he assured her.

The witch smiled and nodded at him. Then she pulled out a pair of white ribbons. They were the sort that could usually be found in her hair. One went around Oscar's left bicep. Tinasha tied the other around her own arm.

"What are these?" questioned Oscar.

“I don’t know how this is going to go. If anything happens, give that a tug. The other person will feel it.”

“You feel a pull? That’s all it does?”

“That’s all it does. But that’s enough, right?” she asked, dark eyes boring into Oscar. The pair had a peerless, mutual trust. Tinasha knew that with the two of them working together, it would be all right.

She seemed so innocent, and Oscar smiled. “Got it. That’s more than plenty.”

Tinasha grinned back. When she faced forward again, she was back to being the witch who had already lived for over four hundred years.

She held her sword parallel to the ground and held her left hand over the middle of it.

A gang of demons had noticed Nark and were heading their way. The witch’s clear voice rang out loudly.

“Let it be defined—I summon and control you. Light, appear and follow my command!”

A white light hot enough to burn the world flashed across the sky for an instant, swallowing up the pack of demons. It continued to race through the air until it abruptly dispersed.

A man and a woman were floating where the luminance had stopped.

“It’s been a long time, little brat.” The Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned smirked.

Leonora was a witch with rare natural charm.

This extended to more than just her physical appearance, though that also had the power to irrevocably beguile people’s hearts.

She had honey-colored hair that trailed in loose curves and green eyes. Her union of looks and grace were enough to ruin nations. In her gaze was a bloodthirsty hunger, though there was also something dissociative there, as if she’d lost interest in everything.

A dark-skinned, red-haired man stood next to Leonora, his sword drawn.

The Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned smiled sweetly. “I’ve come to see you. Are you satisfied now?”

Tinasha’s only response to that was a sneer. She lightly kicked off the dragon’s back and leaped into the air, slashing horizontally with her blade.

“These threads wait for no affirmation.”

It was a short incantation, refined to the utmost.

As she spoke, hundreds of red threads materialized from her sword and flew at Leonora and Unai.

Leonora put out a hand to try to shoot them down with magic, but they stretched out like a spiderweb and encased her barrier. Each thread was as sharp as a needle, striking at the two of them from all directions.

Leonora tutted in annoyance. *“Repel!”*

Her fierce force of will made the red threads on one side vanish.

Now Leonora could see again, but Tinasha was no longer there.

Then a fearsome shock wave crashed down onto Unai from right above him. Never given a chance to resist, he was slammed onto the desert far below, sending up a massive plume of sand.

"Wha…?" Leonora muttered, frantically trying to check if he was all right, but the dragon diving toward her ally blocked him from view. The witch held up a hand to send an attack at that meddlesome dragon, but she sensed something and teleported a few paces back.

Tinasha's slender sword sliced through where Leonora had been a mere second earlier.

Tinasha swung her sword back up and offered her a cordial smile. "Don't worry about Unai. My man will entertain him."

"Spirit sorcerers who've lost their purity are so insolent…"

"I had to redo all my spells, you know. Admittedly, I'm grateful for the chance to test them in combat," said the Witch of the Azure Moon, lifting her left hand toward Leonora and launching a compressed mass of power at her.

Thrust ungracefully onto the desert sands, Unai bounced to his feet. Leonora had fortified his body so that he could take an impact like that without a scratch.

Partway through brushing off sand, he held his sword above his head on instinct.

As though to answer the gesture, a powerful blow crashed down.

The hit was so violent that an ordinary person would have felt it vibrating through their bones. But Unai bore it and forced his opponent's sword back. Said opponent jumped off the dragon and used that momentum to leap back.

The master of the royal sword straightened up, his feet crunching on the sand. He stared back at Unai, a brash smile curling his lips. His dragon swooped in circles above them in the sky.

"Your sword is an eyesore. I'll bury it along with its user," proclaimed Unai.

"I can't have that. She'd be pissed," Oscar replied playfully, making sure of his footing.

It was easy to slip on such loose ground. So long as the king was careful, however, he didn't foresee an issue. He readied Akashia, breathed out hard, and rushed at Unai.

"Has your firepower lost some of its spark? What a fool you were," taunted Leonora.

Tinasha smiled. "I'm free to live my life the way I please."

As she spoke, she cast a spell with no incantation, using her sword as an intermediary. At the same time, she intoned a different bit of magic that formed in her left hand. She brandished the sparking sword at Leonora.

Lightning lanced forward from Tinasha's weapon, shedding white flame as it traveled. Following its track, Tinasha teleported in front of Leonora. Without wasting a second, she hurled the other spell she'd readied.

Not to be outdone, the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned raised her left hand and absorbed the bolt of electricity with it. Then she infused her right hand with magic and caught Tinasha's second attack there.

There was a moment of stillness, and then a huge explosion bloomed as their peerless powers collided.

The two witches rode the backlash and distanced themselves from each other, both still hovering.

Tinasha dismissed her sword and began to weave a spell in both hands.

"I define the state of things. Nonexistence shall be zero. Existence shall be one. Words in the form of code command a transformation."

Intricately intertwining silver sigils appeared before her. They absorbed magic from her and glimmered brightly.

The symbols formed a sphere that slowly expanded in size before assuming the form of giant fanged jaws.

"*…Go,*" Tinasha ordered, and the maw glided through the air toward Leonora, who leaped to the right.

As she kept her distance from the jaws advancing on her, she threw a succession of spheres of light at them. But the jaws absorbed all of them as they pursued and closed in on her. When she saw them open wide, panic flashed across her face.

"Why, you…!"

Its sharp fangs almost snatched hold of her, but before they could, Leonora tapped herself. Her fingertips were infused with magic. When the spell's power poured into the giant set of jaws, they imploded and fell apart.

Leonora had no time to feel relieved, though, as a sharp, keen pain seared into her.

"…Ngh!"

Looking down, she saw a dagger stabbing into the white flesh of her calf. Cursing, she pulled it out. The wound closed up instantly.

As Tinasha watched her opponent heal, she frowned slightly. "While I knew she could do that, it is quite troublesome…"

As a witch, no one was superior to Leonora in the restorative arts. Even if Tinasha landed an attack to keep her in check, the injury would mend immediately. This was partly why no one had managed to kill Leonora.

"Do I need to land a more lethal blow…?"

As Tinasha pondered how to strike next, she prepared a new spell and raced through the air.

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From the ramparts, Meredina watched the eastern sky.

For a while now, she'd heard the sounds of tremendous blasts, accompanied by bursts of red and white light far in the distance. As enormous spells collided, all mages in view of the spectacle gazed with bated breath.

Als clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “They’re here.”

Meredina spied a pack of demons winging over from the south. They must have slipped through a gap in the spirits’ defenses. Tension thrummed through the people on the ramparts at the enemy’s arrival.

Als unsheathed his sword. The sizable double-edged weapon was tinged with an almost wet sort of shine. He swung it about, gauging its weight, then made toward the southeast.

He arrived just in time to see the first demon set upon a guardsman.

Als ran in front of the soldier and slashed diagonally. The instant the sharp point found flesh, a deep laceration gouged its way into the creature, as if the blade were wider than it was. The sword’s full arc left the demon’s body lopped in two pieces that toppled lifelessly to the ground.

“Good cutting ability. I should’ve known,” Als remarked to himself.

Meredina hurried to his side. He checked her over, then readied his weapon for the next enemy to come swooping down.

Doan glanced over worriedly as he caught sight of Als and Meredina battling monsters out of the corner of his eye.

Almost all the mages were busy maintaining Tinasha’s spell. The enchantment that prevented the summoning of more demons in the desert was their greatest strength and vulnerability. The fortress would fall if enemies broke past Tinasha’s spirits and summoned fresh troops nearby. For this reason, Doan and the others were pouring magic into the spell, carefully and intently.

Fortunately, Als and his fellow soldiers kept the demons from reaching the mages. Just as Doan dared to believe that things would be okay so long as there were no surprises, an unfamiliar man teleported right in front of him.

The man’s long hair was a faint violet color, and so were his eyes. Such inhuman coloring and gorgeous looks were traits often seen in high-ranking demons. Doan realized what was happening and shuddered.

This wasn’t one of Tinasha’s spirits, which meant he was a demon who served Leonora.

An enemy had appeared unexpectedly, and Doan started to construct a different spell while still maintaining the major one.

Unfortunately, the demon’s eyes fixed right on him. He didn’t have any time to attack or defend himself. He prepared for death, but Neona unsheathed her sword and struck.

“Take that!”

The intruder took one look at her and repelled her sword with his bare hand. Pushed backward, Neona fell to the ground.

“Princess Nephelli!” shouted Gait. Doan was shocked at that revelation, but grateful for the time she’d bought him. He and several other mages hurled magic at the demon.

It was a high-voltage attack by a team of court mages. Such a level of power would have erased a human without leaving so much as a speck behind, but the demon withstood it without lifting a finger.

Doan stood dumbfounded as he watched his ineffectual attack vanish.

The demon looked around with a cruel smirk. “I was ordered to take one of you back alive. It doesn’t matter who.”

Everyone gasped. They understood the enemy’s goal immediately—a hostage in exchange for Oscar or Tinasha.

The demon reached out for Pamyra, who was close to him. Her expression contorted to show a mix of nervousness and obstinance.

When he saw that, Doan exclaimed, “Don’t do it!”

Pamyra jumped slightly and looked at him.

She’d been prepared to end her life in service of her lady. Doan stopped her with one harsh glare.

His king had told them not to perish needlessly. They couldn’t disobey that order.

But at the same time, they didn’t have a reliable way of breaking out of this situation.

“What, is it already over?” the demon teased, watching them with amusement as he reached for Pamyra again.

Just as he was about to touch her, the high-pitched voice of a young girl called, “What stupid thing are you doing? Are you an idiot?”

A hand appeared out of thin air behind the demon. It was pale and elegant, but each of the nails was as long as a hook, curved and glittering.

The talons bore down toward the demon’s neck, and he narrowly avoided the swipe.

He whirled around, and the rest of Pamyra’s savior appeared. It was a red-haired girl wearing a dauntless grin.

The violet-haired demon’s eyes widened in shock. “Mila Fierua. How many thousands of years has it been?”

“I don’t know who you are, nobody,” the witch’s spirit declared arrogantly in a lilting tone. Then she clacked her claws, ready to rake through her prey.

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Oscar met the sword thrust at him, his boots scraping for purchase in the white sand, and leaped backward as he forced it back.

He kept finding openings and striking at Unai, but the other man’s inhuman reflexes allowed him to fall back before suffering anything critical. Any blows Oscar did manage to land healed up instantly. It was plain enough that Oscar was the more skilled fighter, but the battle threatened to last forever. As time went on, fatigue would set in, and he would be at a disadvantage.

He couldn’t spare a glance up at the sky, but he’d heard explosions and seen flashes of light reflected on the ground. The witches must still be battling.

“I wanted to take care of my part first… I wonder what to do,” muttered Oscar, leveling the point of Akashia at Unai.

Leonora’s red-haired right-hand man struck at Oscar with his sword, kicking up a small cloud of sand. As Oscar parried one thrust, then another from his opponent’s curved blade, he watched for an opening.

After he parried the fifth attack, Oscar swiftly sent Akashia chasing after Unai’s sword arm while it was still drawn back. He sliced through the middle of the limb, cleaving through before Unai could jump out of the way.

Fresh blood spilled onto the ground.

Unai’s right arm dropped to the sand.

Oscar’s strikes kept coming as he tried to lop off Unai’s head next. The one-armed man caught the blade with his left hand.

As he did, his right arm was growing back. Oscar stared in shock at the hand growing out of the bloody stump.

“I suppose *inhuman* really is the appropriate word for you,” he quipped.

“Weaklings can joke now?” spat Unai dryly.

Oscar struck at his enemy’s left arm, then immediately pulled Akashia back. He took a step back before kicking Unai’s severed limb and sword far away.

Unai stared at his weapon as it moved to an inaccessible location. His gaze dropped to his empty right hand. The man’s eyes narrowed, and his re-grown hand transformed into a large sickle. Unai brandished his weaponized right hand above him.

“All your struggling is fruitless. You’re just a human in the end,” the man declared.

“We’ll see if it was fruitless when it’s all over,” Oscar shot back, grinning as he readjusted his grip on Akashia.

Spell after spell sped from Tinasha’s hands, and the woman barely kept from sighing.

Two female demons—twins—had been assisting Leonora for a while now. Their long, soft white hair fluttered in the air as they pursued Tinasha.

“This is extremely irritating…,” she muttered, blocking an incessant rain of attacks as she watched for an opportunity to counter. Her spirits were all keeping the other demons in check and defending the fortress, so she couldn’t ask them to be her backup. One or two of her servants might find themselves free after a time, but the witch couldn’t wait that long.

Tinasha darted to one side to avoid a volley of light arrows that poured down at her. Through the luminous downpour, she could see Leonora working on a massive spell.

Her vibrant green eyes landed on Tinasha, and she sneered. “You’re just going to run around? I see that four centuries have done little to improve your tactics.”

As she spoke, her spell—a magic attack infused with a tremendous amount of power—erupted forth.

A gigantic scarlet vortex closed in on Tinasha. Arching an eyebrow, she jumped back. As if to draw the string of an imperceptible bow, she pulled her right arm back.

Then she let an invisible arrow fly.

"Pierce through."

The projectile was honed as sharp as any could be. It lanced into the center of the vortex—and shot through it.

The arrow ran straight into Leonora's belly, splitting it open.

Bits of flesh and blood flew through the air, and her face contorted into a mask of pain and rage. As for the conjured tornado, it rose up high into the sky thanks to Tinasha warping its trajectory.

"I'll admit you've got a trick or two up your sleeve, brat…," Leonora seethed. The wound in her belly closed instantaneously.

"Of course I do. We're witches," Tinasha replied.

"I know that. Better than you do, I'd say," snapped the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned, spitting out bloody saliva. Then she aimed a palm toward the desert below. "So I'm going to show you what a real witch is, since your life of complacency seems to have robbed you of that knowledge."

Leonora's green eyes darkened a shade. The scorn disappeared from her beautiful features. In a blank voice, she intoned:

"That which is changing, that which has no form, end your state of flux. Destroy your form. That will be the end of the finite."

Then she murmured lovingly:

"Appear, my everlasting stones."

Minute tremors sounded from the earth in reply to Leonora's words. The vibrations were coming from the desert down below. More precisely, they were coming from the wasteland underneath.

Leonora's eyes were fixed on one section of the desert that began to tremble, gripped by some force. A whirlpool kicked up, pulling in everything nearby, including Oscar. Unai stood right where he was.

Tinasha went pale and cried out, "Oscar! I'm going to teleport you!"

She cast a transportation array to pull Oscar out of there. But Leonora hurled her own power at it, smashing it apart.

"Ugh…! You're maddening!"

Tinasha threw up a barrier against the magic Leonora kept hurling at her. She searched for Oscar down in all the swirling sand—

Suddenly, thousands of insects with crimson wings came fluttering out of nowhere, so thick she couldn't see a thing.

"Bloodred butterflies?!"

The creatures that formed from chaos between the realms—born from the casting of large-scale forbidden curses.

Tinasha had no idea what was happening, but down below her feet, something long buried was emerging.

The object's eruption through the white sand was heralded by terrible quaking.

A titanic block of amber caught the sun's rays, glittering gold.

And locked away inside it was a castle, of all things.

Dumbfounded, Tinasha identified the structure that had slept below the wasteland. It was something from one of the myths surrounding Leonora.

"…The Amber Castle."

"Isn't it gorgeous? I made it a long time ago," Leonora said proudly.

The Amber Castle of legends was a real castle that had existed in the Dark Age. It was a secluded place inhabited by nobles and intellectuals who had escaped the horrors of war. But one day, Leonora visited and sealed the building, and everyone within, inside a giant block of amber.

Then she buried it under the wasteland.

As the Amber Castle touched open air for the first time in hundreds of years, it created hordes of bloodred butterflies. Tinasha clapped a hand to her mouth at the sheer scale of how many people had died while shut up in the castle.

But then she realized the situation and gasped. "Oscar…"

She couldn't find him at first, but spied a small crack on one side of the Amber Castle when she looked closer. He had probably used Akashia to cut open a hole and gone inside to keep from being flattened between the sands and the castle. Such a maneuver wouldn't have been possible under normal circumstances, but Leonora had made the Amber Castle out of magic, which enabled his desperate move.

Tinasha was partially relieved but looked up when she felt a colossal wave of magic. She looked at Leonora and saw a mass of magic in her hands —one far surpassing that of the attack she'd just fired. Tinasha realized that at some point, all the bloodred butterflies had disappeared. With a strained smile, she asked, "Is this your trump card?"

"What a tacky way of putting it. This is all my territory," Leonora retorted. The woman launched a blinding surge of white light, imbued with strength exacerbated by innumerable butterfly bloodstones.

Such immense magic could destroy anything in its path. Leonora had poured all of her might into this blow, and it burned the air as it grew larger and larger.

I can't take this hit, Tinasha thought, and she moved to evade it. But she realized what was behind her and stopped. The fortress was at her back. If she escaped, the garrison and everyone in it would perish.

"Vanish this meaning! My thoughts shall transform the world! Vanish it! …Vanish it!"

Tinasha manifested a defensive barrier in front of her. She poured as much magic as she could into it. Pale brilliance blocked out the sky, so bright it dazzled the eyes.

The next thing Tinasha knew, Leonora's attack overtook her.
The massive magic attack rocked the sky.

Even the encased castle trembled. As Oscar walked down a hallway glittering with gold, he frowned and looked around him.

"Did she do something…?" he muttered, but there was no reply. He also saw no sign of the grotesquely shaped opponent he needed to defeat.

When the castle appeared from underground, Unai had gotten sucked into the amber forming the outer shell. Oscar was nearly engulfed when he slipped after his enemy into the resin.

The structure's interior was as still as death. Akashia in hand, Oscar made his way down a deserted corridor.

"The Amber Castle, huh…? Now that I see it up close, it's just a regular palace," he commented. He'd been shocked to see the huge mass of amber rising from below the earth, but the interior was a more familiar scene.

Half-decomposed human skeletons were strewn here and there, and red butterflies fluttered about, but aside from that, Oscar spotted nothing extraordinary. Amber had seeped in around the windows, but not so much as to make the halls impassable.

Oscar reached the end of the long passage and entered the great hall at the castle's center. As in the ballroom in Gandona's castle, the ceiling formed a tall, vaulted atrium.

Golden light filtered into the hall; it was like a magic palace out of a storybook. Light was refracted and glittered along the walls and ceiling, lending the space a splendor worthy of adoring sighs.

However, this was a place forgotten by time.

As he looked around the empty hall, Oscar readied his weapon. He saw Unai standing in the middle of the room and frowned in confusion. "I know you can contort your body however you want, but can you really pass through the amber, too?"

"Lady Leonora created me and this castle," Unai answered.

"And what a loyal follower you are. You still obey that woman even though you're not human anymore?" Oscar inquired.

"She saved me when I was on the verge of death. That was when she gave me this body," Unai replied, gazing down at his sickle hand. In his eyes was all the nostalgia of someone who had lived a very long time. It didn't matter whether Oscar understood or not.

A frown crossed Oscar's handsome face, but he quickly assumed a combative stance. "Sorry, but if I don't get out fast, my cat's going to lose her temper."

"There's no need to rush. You have all the time in the world. Just live inside this castle and never change," said Unai.

"As one of her collectibles? No thanks, I'll pass," Oscar shot back.

A foreboding of death filled the glimmering hall, so reminiscent of a child's jewelry box.

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It was utterly silent on the top floor of the petrified castle.

This was where the people who had fled the wartime destruction of the Dark Age had gathered. Yet true peace descended upon the place only when Leonora sealed the palace in amber. Free from the fear of death, the structure could go on forever, unchanging. By the witch's hands, it had been preserved in all its beauty.

Leonora walked through the glittering throne room, accompanied by two of her demon followers.

Thrilled over her victory against Tinasha, she felt a brief rush of exhilaration.

Once it had faded, there was only apathy. Somewhere along the way, that had become her constant. Leonora was bored to tears. She'd lost interest in the world, and everything had gotten so annoying.

The witch reached the stone throne and flopped onto it languidly.

"Poor, pitiful girl," she muttered triumphantly, though the words felt hollow. A smile twisted her red lips.

No one could take a hit like that dead-on. Such was the fate she deserved for growing fond of a mortal.

It had been a fun game.

Leonora had inserted herself into the downfalls of many a country and many a mortal, but of all her distractions, this had been her favorite. Tinasha was strong, beautiful, foolish, and young—the ultimate opponent. And, of course, it was fun because she'd won the game.

But…the more fun a game was, the more despondency she was left with afterward.

Once all her passion and enthusiasm evaporated, a sense of meaninglessness—like sinking into a bottomless ocean—gripped the woman.

It was no different from the day her home and childhood went up in flames.

"…Elou, my sister."

She closed her eyes and recalled memories of a day in the past, long, long ago.

After she'd lost her parents in the attack on that snowy day, an older male cousin took guardianship of Elou.

Her older twin had disappeared, and when Elou learned that her sibling had been killed like their parents, she was overcome with loneliness.

Still, she tried to live optimistically. She did as her cousin recommended and agreed to marry him when she was of age and inherited her father's lands. A peaceful life should have awaited her.

When had she learned that her existence was all a lie?

Was it upon learning that her cousin had secretly sent soldiers out to the old woman's cottage? Or maybe when her older twin, Leonora, who had

been living there, burst into the castle, drenched in blood? It could also have been after Elou discovered that it was none other than her cousin who had orchestrated the death of her parents and sister so that he could wed her.

Elou's wedding dress was stained crimson. Her other half lay flat on the ground before her.

"Leonora! Leonora, my sister, stay with me! Don't leave me!" Elou cried.

After ten years, the twins had at last reunited, only for one to be left behind again.

That was why, desperately, she reached out to take her dying sister's magic, her soul, her memories—so they could become one again, just as they once were in the womb.

And so Elou became Leonora.

Or did Leonora become Elou?

Leonora pressed her ivory-white fingers against her face.

She'd quit asking the meaningless question of which girl she was a long time ago.

When she combined two people into one and summoned the highest-ranking demon to remake her body for revenge…her mind had been in such a haze of pain and bitterness that it felt nearly shattered.

That was how she'd become a witch.

She was free now, and there was no need to be fettered with hatred. All that mattered was to pursue her own fancy.

With blank eyes, she gazed at the hall. Unconsciously, she whispered, "…I might as well have been the one to die."

Fatigue weighed heavy on Leonora. Suddenly, a powerful wave of sleep gripped her.

Leonora covered her heavy eyelids—but just then, she felt a vibration from downstairs.

Unai must still be fighting. With a scowl, she got to her feet. "That little gnat who doesn't know his place… I'll tear him to pieces."

The demons flanking the witch bowed.

While he might be the swordsman of Akashia, in this castle, Leonora was the absolute ruler. She concentrated, reaching out with her mind to locate him.

No sooner had she done so than her two attending demons were abruptly blown to smithereens.

Not a drop of blood was left—just black specks floating in the air.

The witch looked up in astonishment. There was a hole in the ceiling, and an ebon-haired witch was dropping in through it. The right side of Tinasha's body was burned hideously red, but when she spoke, it was in a clear voice that did not indicate any pain. "Who did you say you killed?"

Tinasha gave a small grin so laden with anger it seemed to burn.

"…Damn you…"

Leonora had seen such fury before, though Tinasha's bloodlust was far, far keener and sharper. Leonora felt outmatched.

Tinasha extended an inviting hand.

"I'll make you regret that you ever became a witch," she growled in a voice as sweet as lethal poison.

Tinasha let her eyes flutter nearly closed. She was in a trance as the emotions governing her whole body took over.

Her enemy stood before her—only a trifling thing.

She wanted to kill her.

She could kill her.

She had the power to do so.

Power gathered in her body. The whole world aligned with her drive to destroy. The hall inside the castle locked in amber creaked and groaned. The power to wipe away the desert and all that sat upon it was coalescing in Tinasha's palms.

Tinasha was about to cast a simple spell to pour that magic into when she realized the ribbon tied to her left arm had come undone. She noticed it lying on the floor and paused.

"…Oscar."

A small drop of water became a wave. Her composure came back to her like the tide coming in. Tinasha abandoned her spell and let the power fade back.

I can't do that. Everyone would die.

She had explicitly avoided getting overly involved with people so that she wouldn't destroy them in her anger.

Wielding that power now would be like rendering her decision to choose Oscar a mistake. And it would make him into an idiot king for selecting her, something Tinasha refused to do.

Leonora was staring at her suspiciously. "What's wrong?"

Tinasha answered bluntly. "I decided to stop hating you."

"…Why? You have all that power. You're so…"

Beautiful, Leonora almost admitted, but she held her tongue. Her pride wouldn't allow her to say such a thing. This black-haired woman was her enemy.

Tinasha didn't answer Leonora's question.

In the dark abyss of her eyes, there was no longer resentment nor glee. Instead, there resided a silent glow like a lake in the night—the light of the soul. Tinasha's eyes closed as she took a deep breath in.

Then, slowly, she opened them and smiled. "I'm going to beat you. No more close calls. Come with me, and I'll play with you."

Leonora's eyes bulged. Hatred surged in those green orbs.

Tinasha met those flames of emotion with a bemused, helpless smile.

Shortly after entering the Amber Castle, Oscar could sense that some sort of violent collision had happened somewhere above. His protective barrier had wavered along with it.

Unai picked up on the same thing and gave Oscar a half smile. “Looks like the Witch of the Azure Moon has no way out, either. It’s just you left.”

“Oh yeah?” Oscar retorted, advancing on his opponent. Unai’s sickle met Akashia.

No matter what Unai said, Oscar was growing less worried by the second. He knew Tinasha wasn’t dead. He could feel the familiar sensation of her protection on him, the same as it always was.

Still, she certainly could be careless when it came to herself. It was possible she was injured, and the last thing anyone needed was her falling into blind fury. Oscar wanted to check on how she was doing before things reached a deadlock.

“Now, what to do about it…,” he murmured as he swung his sword. Akashia’s sharp, glittering blade cut off Unai’s sickle. However, the thing regrew immediately, just as it had before. “I feel like I’m fighting an octopus or a squid.”

I suppose it’s a good thing that he can’t use magic himself, but I’d honestly prefer to go up against a powerful mage, thought Oscar. His musing came to an abrupt end when something above caught his attention.

He sensed magic gathering somewhere near the top of the castle, beyond the high atrium.

It easily dwarfed the considerable blast from earlier. This was so massive that it could wipe out everything if unleashed.

“Tinasha…”

He didn’t need to think about who was responsible. It was his witch.

She was calling up more than enough magic to eradicate the castle. But after it was all over, she and Oscar would be the only ones remaining.

Unai came slashing at him, and he dodged and leaped back. As he did, he untied the ribbon fastened around his left arm. As he struck back at Unai, he repelled that monstrous sickle.

I know that got through to her just now.

That would be enough. The two had fought enough battles together for Oscar to be confident of that.

He suddenly became aware that he was smiling, and Unai frowned at him. “Gone mad, have you?”

“No, I just know something you don’t,” Oscar answered.

“Oh?”

The roof of the atrium was blasted open. Amid a rain of rubble and amber, a shadow descended.

Light as a feather, she set herself down next to Oscar.

The witch in ebon, beautiful no matter how many injuries she sustained.

Oscar patted the head of his beloved and grinned. “She doesn’t lose to anyone.”

The Witch of the Azure Moon landed from the top floor of the castle, flipping her long hair back lightly over one shoulder.

Before her touched down the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned. Leonora glared at the two of them hatefully. “How dare you two…?”

“She looks pretty mad, Tinasha. And how did you get those burns?” Oscar inquired.

“I’ll heal them later, sorry,” Tinasha replied, her reaction unfazed—perhaps she was anesthetizing the pain of the terrible scorches that dotted the right half of her body.

It was actually the unscathed Leonora who appeared more dangerous at the moment.

Oscar sized up the two witches and said to Tinasha, “So you’re going to start all over? She doesn’t have any injuries, so I’m guessing you weren’t able to overcome her healing abilities.”

“Yes, sorry, it’s exactly as you’ve guessed. This castle was also completely beyond what I anticipated,” she answered tartly.

“No, no, I’m in the same boat as you. I don’t mind,” Oscar admitted reasonably, flashing her a soft smile.

Leonora beheld the pair with open scorn. “You’re supposed to be a witch, and you’re acting like a child. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

“That’s your opinion. It’s because I have him that I can be a good, honest person,” Tinasha replied.

“Good? Honest? What are you even saying? You’re a *witch*. That’s ridiculous.” Leonora sniffed.

“You know, for all that, you’re the one throwing a fit like an infant,” Oscar pointed out, poking holes in Leonora’s haughty attitude.

For a moment, her face screwed up in a scowl. Coldly, she whispered, “Silence. I hate men like you the most.”

“I never intended on negotiating with you, either,” Oscar quipped back, stepping forward with Akashia in hand. When Unai saw that, he moved to guard his lady.

Tinasha whispered in a voice only Oscar could hear. “Leonora will heal almost any attack as soon as it lands. The castle also amplifies her magic, so a drawn-out battle puts us at a disadvantage.”

He’d already known about the first part. The king’s witch sighed and went on. “What I need is to land one fatal blow. Which is why…”

Oscar listened to the rest, his face giving nothing away.

Unai took a step forward, clearly opening hostilities.

Charm infused Leonora’s voice as she drawled, “I’m going to put an end to this very soon. All of it. By my hand.”

With that, the final conflict began.

Leonora wove a spell.

This castle was functionally a magical reserve Leonora had created for herself. It was like a gem that lay dormant, cut off from the flow of time, containing the souls of all the people who rotted away in obscurity here.

The structure’s reemergence had released butterfly bloodstones all over the place.

No matter what kind of spell she wove, she wouldn’t want for magic at all.

Tinasha was called the strongest because she had immense magical reserves to draw on, but she couldn’t claim that advantage in the Amber Castle.

Which was why Leonora called up a powerful attack spell—but then she paused in surprise. She had thought Tinasha would be doing the same thing, yet she was attacking Leonora with her sword.

Before the attack could connect, Unai was in front of his master. Tinasha’s slender blade met the man’s sickle, and he knocked her off her feet easily. She went flying, but without a moment’s delay, Oscar struck with Akashia.

Fury flaring up in Leonora, she yelled, “Where do you think you’re looking, brat?!”

“Yeah, I see it,” said Tinasha.

Leonora’s finished spell burst apart. Tinasha used short-range teleportation to appear next to her, thin sword raised and ready.

“You should die already.”

Leonora thought of her as a poor, pitiful girl.

She was the sole survivor of the Magic Empire, destroyed in one night. When Leonora heard about this former potential queen who had come into a vast amount of magical power and survived, she could guess what had happened.

This child was just like her. Betrayal had made her into a witch. That was why she was a slave to revenge. It was incredibly tragic.

She should set herself free, live the way she pleased. Surely both women had enough power to exist free as birds.

However, Tinasha didn’t do that. Very stubbornly, she lived like a captive. And as she did, she was beautiful.

That was why Leonora hated her. She was a complete eyesore.

“…Ngh! Little brat!”

The blade nicked Leonora’s right ear.

The pain was excruciating, but she was used to it. She didn’t even need to concentrate, and the wound would heal.

Leonora teleported backward, dodging the attack. At the same time, Unai was battling the wielder of the royal sword.

She had lived for so very long.

By the time she’d encountered Unai, she’d existed for close to four centuries. When she thought back to that meeting and wondered why she’d saved an imprisoned man on the verge of death, she always concluded that it had been because he was similar to her.

The flames of revenge burned in his heart. That was the emotion left to him in the end by those who’d crushed him underfoot. Leonora gave him power and granted him his revenge.

Once he was free, he followed Leonora silently.

How many years had passed since then? Surely it was nearing double the time she'd lived before meeting him.

Tinasha's attacks were relentless.

None of them inflicted severe wounds on Leonora, but they did drive her little by little over to the edge of the great hall. Irritated with how she couldn't seize the initiative, Leonora saw red. "You're so foolish… Everything you do is futile," the woman spat.

"No, it isn't," replied Tinasha, the point of her sword heading right for the other witch. But just before it reached Leonora, she smashed the blade apart.

Metal fragments glittered, refracting golden light. Another weapon, this one a dagger, lanced forward from some unseen place, striking at Leonora's throat like a serpent. The fast-approaching tip of the blade glowed with a spell.

This was a fierce penetrative attack. Leonora leaped away as soon as she realized as much, but her back hit the wall.

In the next moment, Tinasha's spell let loose, crushing Leonora and the wall behind her.

Never had she thought she'd like to die. There were times when she'd thought idly, *I'd be okay if I died right now*, however. She'd grown so dreadfully tired and sick of how the world never changed.

Yet, even so, she didn't wish to perish. It would make everything she'd done to arrive here for naught.

The fear she'd felt that night in the snow, the shock of losing her older sister, the despair of getting overrun by inhuman beings—she didn't want to cast any of it away. She had the sense that if she gave in and ended her life, it would render worthless both the Leonora who hated everything and the Leonora who'd tossed aside that anger.

Thus death was not an option.

She would win and carry on with her slow, lazy life. Things could continue, and she would freely enjoy herself in this nauseating world.

The witch held no regrets about her ways, never once having believed them wrong.

Therefore—

Leonora was thrust through the wall, shattering it, and collapsed in the rubble on the other side.

As soon as she was aware of the pain, her broken limbs and shredded internal organs started to knit back together.

But her thoughts were heated. The pain was reviving a fury she should have half forgotten.

Amid the dancing shards of amber, she could see that Tinasha had retreated far back. Leonora flew forward in pursuit of her. "Did you chicken out, brat?!"

"Of course not," answered Tinasha, and she pointed up at the ceiling. What remained of the upper portion of the castle was smashed apart.

Overhead was a clear blue sky. The sun's rays shone in.

Clear tinkling sounds poured down from above along with a rain of countless tiny, glittering pieces of amber.

The light and shower of resin made it difficult to see.

Tinasha slid behind the curtain of blinding amber, wanting to draw up a spell while she had the chance.

Unfortunately, it was meaningless for anyone but Leonora to cast anything in this castle. The Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned called up an attack spell in her right hand and thrust her palm out toward what lay past the curtain of shimmering gold. "Die!" she shouted, her voice that of an eager hunter.

Yet her magic didn't go off. Leonora felt an odd impact and looked down at her chest.

There was Akashia, stuck deep in her breast.

"How?" she whispered, falling to the floor. Her eyes darted all over as she collapsed, wondering what had happened.

She was unable to use her power, so her wounds couldn't heal. Akashia impaled her, and it was going to end everything.

Leonora located the man lying facedown before Tinasha in the center of the room and called to him. "U…nai…"

She was so cold. It was like she was back in that snow on that night again. All alone, freezing, on the verge of death.

No, she refused to go backward. She'd made so much progress since that day. She'd moved ahead, lived…and now she was growing weary.

The passage of time had done little to make the world a kinder place.

"Unai…I'm going to sleep, just for a bit…"

Leonora closed her eyes.

She reached out a questing hand for someone amid a pool of spreading blood.

"Stay with me…until I…"

The witch hoped that her slumber would bring no dreams.

"…Elou."

With the name of someone she'd lost long ago on her lips and in her mind, Leonora took her final breath.

"Did everything go okay?" asked Oscar, pulling Akashia out of the witch's body now that she'd breathed her last.

Tinasha was inspecting Unai's corpse, but she looked up at Oscar's inquiry. "Yes, fighting in this hall was perfect for us. So long as we kept the battle here, our victory was assured."

Tinasha had destroyed the castle's roof and upper floors and used the falling amber pieces as a smokescreen for her and Oscar to change places. That was why she had deliberately pushed Leonora to one side of the room.

Leonora had lost her cool, irritated over the pain of her injuries and being shoved around. Luring her into retaliating had been a trifle, and that was when she'd suffered a fatal blow from the Mage Killer.

Neither Leonora nor Unai had noticed that their opponents had switched places, and they wound up defeated.

Oscar frowned all over again at Tinasha's burns. "Hurry up and heal those. It's painful just to look at them."

"Urgh, wait a minute," she responded. Reciting a quiet incantation, she lifted both hands. The remaining parts of the castle began to crumble.

The patch of sky overhead widened. The castle turned to sand and disappeared, just like a child's game coming to a close. Tinasha took charge of the giant spell banning all summoning and rewrote it slightly.

"Return."

The camouflaged configuration floated up over the desert. It started to give off a white light until it all focused together skyward, virtually getting sucked up.

At the same time, all the demons Leonora had conjured vanished without a trace.

※

Als was startled when the demon he was fighting in the corridor abruptly disappeared. He looked all around him, but the enemies were gone. Behind, the mages were equally speechless as the spell they were maintaining was taken from them.

Nearby, Mila had been right about to cut down a high-ranking demon. She giggled.

Near her, Senn sighed. "Well, that took long enough."

Als looked down at his sword. "Did we…win?"

Next to him, Meredina cocked her head. "…It would appear so."

Kumu snapped back to himself the fastest and directed the mages to heal the wounded. All at once, there was a new flurry of activity, but Nephelli just gazed out the window at the eastern sky.

So is it all over now?

None of it felt real. She hadn't done anything.

A dragon's shadow raced across the ground in the distance. While she was relieved to see it, a sense of loneliness also welled up inside her.

It wasn't over. Things were only beginning.

Once she returned to the chaotic royal court, she would be the only one who could support her father and brother.

Oscar and Tinasha were greeted by a round of cheers when they arrived back at the fortress.

Tinasha was comforted to hear that there had been no deaths, and Mila latched right on to her. "Lady Tinasha, praise me."

“Thank you, Mila, you’re very strong,” Tinasha said, patting Mila’s head. The demonic spirit’s eyes closed happily. Senn grabbed her by the collar and dragged her away, and she curtsied before vanishing along with him.

From behind, Oscar dropped a hand onto Tinasha’s head. “I’ll handle the cleanup here. You should change and get some sleep if you want.”

“Okay,” Tinasha replied. While her wounds had been closed, the same could not be said of her clothes. Oscar had given her his jacket to wear. Tinasha thanked a teary-eyed Pamyra for her service before disappearing with her into the fortress.

Oscar watched them go, then turned to Nephelli. She hadn’t taken her eyes off him. “Well, Princess Nephelli, shall we establish an agreed-upon series of events?”

The king spoke quite naturally. Naturally, he’d seen right through her facade. She grimaced, bowed her head, and apologized for her rudeness in lying about her identity. Then she set off alongside Oscar.

Without the sandstorm, the sky looked so peaceful that it almost seemed nostalgic. Nephelli felt so relaxed that she suddenly blurted out something that had been needling at her mind for a while. “Eleven years ago…why did Farsas reject the marriage talks?”

Oscar looked surprised for a moment before he gave an awkward smile. “Apparently, I have strong magical power. No normal woman can bear my child. And I couldn’t bear to kill someone who had wed me to ensure peace simply because I got her pregnant.”

Nephelli’s eyes widened a little when she heard that, but she quickly smiled. It didn’t matter if that was true or not. Any answer at all seemed a weight off her shoulders.

Her life wasn’t meant to be intertwined with his. Their paths had converged a little here, but now they would go their separate ways again.

The countenance of a princess restored, Nephelli thought about what was to come and pulled herself together.

※

After a light bath to rinse off the blood and sweat, Tinasha changed into ordinary mage’s robes. She felt a familiar presence and smiled. Soon enough, she heard a man say, “Sounds like that was a pretty close fight there. Not as good as you used to be?”

“I couldn’t help it. I was trying out a lot of spells for the first time. Besides, my duel with you was *much* harder,” she answered.

“You better believe it was,” quipped the silver-haired man, popping into her room with a sneer curling his lips.

Tinasha felt Pamyra tense up and put out a hand to stop her. Travis, the king of the demons, folded his arms and smirked at her. She eyed him as she dried her hair. “Anyway, you’re going to keep your promise, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I will. I won’t lay a finger on Farsas so long as your blood runs in the veins of the royal family,” Travis drawled.

“I actually wish you’d just leave the country alone regardless of my involvement, but…”

“I’d never agree to that. Brazen of you to even ask,” Travis finished.

“Well, I suppose this much is good enough,” Tinasha decided with a smile, adjusting her now-dry hair.

Killing Leonora had been a personal bit of revenge, of course, but Tinasha had also gone through with it because Travis had made her an offer she couldn’t refuse. It wasn’t an easy proposition at all to get him to swear that a living calamity such as he wouldn’t interfere in things—especially if the agreement remained after Tinasha’s death.

No one but Tinasha and Travis knew about their deal, but no one else needed to.

As Tinasha gathered up her hair, Travis asked her, “What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to live and die with him. I’ll have to restore my body to the natural flow of time to have children, after all,” she answered.

“I see,” he hummed, sounding uninterested even though he was the one who’d asked. He waved, looking like he was about to go.

Tinasha said, “Give my regards to Aurelia. Tell her thank you.”

“I will,” Travis responded before vanishing without a trace of magic.

Turning around to face Pamyra, Tinasha smiled at her. “That’s one thing settled.”

Pamyra was still astonished at the discussion she’d just witnessed, and she could only sigh in response to her lady’s mischievous grin. Tinasha knew she’d exasperated her attendant, and she cast her gaze out the window.

There was now one fewer witch in the world.

She had no particularly strong feelings about that fact. The word *witch* was only a term by which women with too much power were exalted over ordinary humans. The title was pointless and conferred no authority or meaning.

Tinasha had no desire to investigate Leonora’s reason for living as a witch or discover what she had sacrificed along the way.

Instead, she was content to merely hold on to the memory of the woman she had known, a trivial fragment of the whole.

Some might call that sentimental, but Tinasha was okay with it.

7. Before Act One Ends

He was the first successful challenger in seventy years. And he'd climbed it practically alone.

Naturally, she was intrigued. The long years had slowly worn down her mind, and meeting a challenger would be a nice distraction.

She heard the door open. There were no footsteps. He must be fairly capable.

Her voice carried well as she called out to him while pouring a cup of tea.

"Welcome."

※

"I—I really ended up changing my mind…," Tinasha muttered as she stared at herself in the mirror, amazed.

The year she'd spent as his protector felt so full and yet had passed in the blink of an eye.

From the mirror, the witch saw Pamyra's reflection smile with satisfaction. "You look beautiful—the loveliest bride ever to be."

"I never even dreamed I'd get married," admitted Tinasha.

"Everyone says that," responded Pamyra.

While they spoke, Sylvia very seriously placed the veil on Tinasha's head and let out a deep sigh. Then she straightened up. "You're all done! You can move now!"

"Thank you," said Tinasha, and she got to her feet gingerly. The train on her dress and her veil were both long enough to fill up half the dressing room. The snow-white wedding dress accentuated Tinasha's ebon, abyss-like eyes.

The witch took a few steps forward and sighed. "It would be faster to teleport…"

"You have to walk!" Pamyra admonished her.

"Urgh. This dress is so heavy," Tinasha complained.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. A magistrate had come to lead the bride-to-be.

Pamyra straightened the train of the veil and opened the door. The people outside the door gasped when they caught sight of Tinasha, and she winced and stepped out nonchalantly.

The castle cathedral was already filled with guests, both domestic and international.

Oscar was in the cathedral's anteroom pulling on his gloves. He glanced at his father next to him. "This is such a bother. We could have done something simpler."

"This is going to go down in history. It will only happen once, so you must present yourselves properly."

His father's "only happen once" could have generally referred to the wedding itself or the fact that it was a witch being married. Oscar couldn't tell which it was, but he gave a reluctant nod. His coronation had been a bare-bones affair, so he supposed he needed to resign himself to a full ceremony this time.

On the other hand, his bride would be riding from a location outside the city to arrive at the castle for the ritual, parading herself through throngs of people. This tradition was likely a holdover from the days when soon-to-be queens would come from foreign countries to secure political unions. Oscar objected to it on the basis of security, but his betrothed had retorted: "It'll be easier than guarding you." Right about now, they were probably getting the carriage ready for her.

Both Oscar and Tinasha had been so busy this week that they hadn't seen each other once. It was a tradition for the bride and groom not to meet before the wedding anyhow. That was actually another reason Oscar had wanted a more straightforward marriage.

He belted on the royal sword and checked his appearance in the mirror.

"Come, it's time to go," his father urged.

Oscar nodded and headed for the door. Behind him, his father said, "Rosalia would be so proud of you."

At his mother's name, he closed his eyes. So many people had helped bring him to life and helped him on his way to this moment.

It was truly extraordinary.

With gratitude from the bottom of his heart, Oscar walked through the door.

Fuss and commotion stirred up the crowds gathered along the main road through the castle city.

The king's bride was about to come down the street. But for them, it wasn't necessarily something they could openly delight in. People exchanged glances and murmured in gloomy tones, "It's that witch, isn't it?"

"But they told us the stories about her are wrong, didn't they?"

"Still…"

When the fact that the king was marrying a witch was publicized, it was also announced that as of the wedding, the old stories that Farsas was familiar with would be amended. Tinasha recommended leaving them as they were, insisting that old fairy tales weren't anything to worry over. However, Oscar had asserted that ancient myths that would dishonor the future queen shouldn't be spread around, especially when they weren't true.

Despite the crown's proclamation, most weren't ready to welcome Tinasha with open arms right away. False stories or not, she was a witch.

Some folks appreciated her past service to the king when she'd fought on the front lines for Farsas, as well as the fact that her tremendous power would surely be a boon to the kingdom. Unfortunately, most of the populace felt deeply conflicted and confused.

"Queen Rosalia was so beautiful."

"This bride's a witch, isn't she? What d'you think she looks like?"

"Probably all wrinkly and dressed in black…"

"She wouldn't wear black to her wedding."

Just then, the carriage bearing the royal bride came into view. It was an open-top buggy protected by multiple layers of sturdy magical barriers. Onlookers craned their necks to see and were struck dumb by the sight of a bride who was far and away not what they had envisioned.

Her white veil set off her cool, clear looks to perfection, and she herself was as lovely as a work of art.

Long eyelashes fluttered about large eyes that were an absorbing, entrancing onyx black. Below her elegant alabaster nose, red lips as pretty as flower petals curved upward in a faint smile.

Everyone was so caught up in simply gazing at her that they forgot to cheer. Many recognized her as the same mage who had ridden next to the king at the New Year procession.

Pamyra, who was sitting across from the witch in the carriage, hissed, "Lady Tinasha, give them a proper smile."

"A proper smile sounds easy, but that's actually a difficult order…," murmured Tinasha.

One reason Oscar had opposed the carriage procession was that he knew that after his announcing that his bride was a witch, the masses would be throwing her prejudiced stares, and he didn't wish to subject her to that. Yet Tinasha disagreed and had elected to ride in.

Regardless of tradition, it was a problem they would have to handle at some point. Dodging the issue wouldn't solve anything, and Tinasha wanted to resolve it as soon as possible so she could stand evenly at Oscar's side.

As Tinasha pasted on a pained smile, she caught sight of someone she recognized. A boy was waving his hand amid the wall of people, and when he realized that she recognized him, he broke into a grin and cried out, "Miss! I mean Lady Tinasha!"

"Saye! How have you been?" she replied.

The boy tried to run up, but soldiers quickly stopped him. Tinasha moved them aside, however. Saye slowed his pace to match the carriage's. The witch almost reached out to pull him into the carriage, but Pamyra held her back.

As he trotted alongside it, he beamed up at her. "I knew you were the witch."

"Yes, I am. I seldom go back to the tower, so you shouldn't have gone there. It's dangerous. If you need anything, come to the castle," she said.

"When I get older, I'm gonna become a soldier. I'll get stronger and protect you!" Saye proclaimed.

"I look forward to that," she replied, breaking into a broad smile as Saye's eyes sparkled in anticipation of his future and with his firm determination. She didn't realize it, but that smile of hers was as lovely as a big blooming flower, captivating all who looked at her. Saye blushed a little.

There was a pause, and then a sudden cheer rose up from the crowd.

Tinasha looked up in surprise. "What? What's going on? Did I do something?"

Pamyra giggled as she observed her lady looking all around her in confusion and heard the unanimous cries of congratulation erupting from the throngs. "And that's why I told you to smile properly. Your grin holds a rather dangerous power."

Tinasha's eyes widened, almost imperceptibly. She looked from Pamyra to Saye and then burst out laughing.

Tinasha's carriage bore her inside Farsas Castle on a wave of ever-spreading applause and well wishes. She alighted and made her way down a covered walk erected for the occasion toward the cathedral.

The door to the chapel came into view, but there was a woman standing before it. Tinasha noticed her and stopped. Security was particularly tight, as it was the king's wedding day. And yet this woman was here in ordinary clothes, clearly not a wedding guest or a castle staff member.

The soldiers walking ahead of Tinasha barked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?!"

They moved to unsheathe their swords, but Tinasha held them back. "I'm sorry, could you let us have a moment to talk?"

"But…," they protested.

"I'll be fine," she assured them lightly, and she stepped toward the woman, who looked to be in her midthirties and wore a chilly expression. She was beautiful, though her looks had a harsh tinge. Her thick chestnut hair was tied up in a ponytail that came to her waist.

Tinasha approached and gave her an awkward smile. "It's been a while, Lavinia… Did you come to see him?"

"Not particularly," the woman said with a sniff.

Tinasha asked somewhat nervously, "Then to kill him?"

"I didn't come for that, either. I just came to see the face of a girl with bizarre tastes."

“Is that all?” asked the king’s bride, cocking her head. Sorrow filled her dark eyes.

Lavinia took no notice of Tinasha’s emotions. “I guess he was lucky enough to win you over. I won’t meddle any further. Do what you want.”

Having decided that was the end of the conversation, Lavinia retreated to one side. Silently, she gestured to the cathedral doors.

Tinasha started to say something to her old acquaintance, but she held her tongue in the end. Shaking her head a little, she approached the entrance to the chapel. The soldiers came running up to open the way for her.

She took a deep, slow breath.

The grand doors groaned deeply as they spread.

A great many people stood and turned at the bride’s arrival. A stir ran through the crowd. Yet their gazes and the roar of their excited whispers seemed so distant they might as well have been from another world entirely.

Tinasha was looking straight ahead.

There he was at the end of the aisle, waiting for her.

Most of the cathedral sighed at the bride’s supernatural beauty.

She made her way toward him in a slow, stately procession.

Unable to take his eyes off her and lost in her beauty, Oscar murmured to himself, “So damn gorgeous.”

Once she came up to the step below the altar where he was standing, she knelt before him and bowed her head. Oscar reached out and lifted back her veil, then placed a small crown on her head.

Then he took Akashia and placed the point of it against her forehead.

In a quiet and yet well-projected voice, he intoned the ceremony’s opening remarks.

“Let a new vow and covenant betwixt us be made. I, Oscar Lyeth Increatos Loz Farsas, take thee, Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr, as queen of Farsas. Thou shalt have all the rights of my wedded wife. I proclaim this here.”

In concert with his words, power with traces of a contract flowed from Akashia into the witch. This as-yet-unexplained force differed from magic; it was something passed down in the Farsas royal family since times of old. No records spoke of it.

As the power spread throughout her, Tinasha spoke. “I accept and give thee my troth. I take thee for my wedded husband with my name and my blood, and pledge myself to thee together with everything that belongs to me.”

This wasn’t an ordinary wedding vow. Her words signified that Farsas would henceforth inherit all that she owned as a witch and as queen of Tuldarr.

And that included the mystical spirits of Tuldarr.

Prior to this, she had suggested to the spirits that their contract with her end upon her death.

However, they all wished to transfer their contracts to those of the Farsas royal line who would bear her blood in their veins, saying that it "sounded fun." They had initially been spirits passed down by the rulers of Tuldarr, where the regent was selected based on power. If they moved to Farsas, there might come a day when no ruler could summon and use them.

But that was a story for another time, far in the future.

Oscar extended a hand and helped his bride to her feet. He whispered in a voice only she could hear, "Four generations later, Farsas finally got you."

His sly joke made one side of Tinasha's lips quirk up. She looked up and into his eyes, which were the color of the sky just after dusk. Mischief danced in his gaze as he grinned at her.

"I don't need Farsas. Just give me you," she replied. Oscar beamed at that, and he bent down and kissed his wife.

Their promise was full of love and their vows to each other.

When the kiss ended, she gave a beautiful expression and said liltingly:

"O king, I am your witch."

A love that made up for her lifelong loneliness.

Everlasting and unshakable feelings.

"And you are my king. This witch pledges her eternal love to you."

The Witch of the Azure Moon smiled like a flower in full bloom, as pure as a young girl.

That day marked a turning point, bringing an end to the Age of Witches that had gripped the land in fear.

8. Memories of Both

He stood alone in a dark room.

He was young, and he couldn’t see very well in the room. The light coming in from the door behind him only faintly illuminated the top of the bed.

It was covered in red blood. Someone’s white hand had fallen in the pool of crimson.

He saw it but couldn’t comprehend. Unable to do anything, he merely stood stock-still.

From somewhere far away, he heard a woman speaking.

“Never again shall you have children. The Farsas royal family dies with you.”

The witch sounded indifferent as she made her pronouncement.

He listened to it somewhat wistfully and finally turned around.

Stronger… I have to get stronger.

Mightier than a witch. Such was the responsibility of someone who bore the weight of a nation on their shoulders.

So he couldn’t go easy on himself at all. He must train, learn, and acquire the power he needed as soon as humanly possible.

That was the burden he’d carried since birth.

He looked at his hands. At the moment, he held nothing in them. But in the future, he must use them to endure every possible hardship.

He didn’t have time to stand still. He had to make use of everything he had and not waste a thing.

And so he turned his back on the pool of blood and strode away to fulfill his duty.

Upon awakening, he wasn’t wholly sure where he was for a moment. He sat up in bed and looked to one side. Sleeping there was his queen, his witch. Tinasha rested soundly, curled up against him. She looked as utterly at ease as a cat. Oscar smiled and stroked his wife’s head.

“…I had a dream of such a long time ago.”

As a child, he’d seen that vision frequently.

That shred of memory from an age when he didn't yet understand the gravity of his curse now seemed like something from another life.

When he was younger, Oscar had believed he needed to grow strong enough to slay a witch. But in the end, fate had other plans. The strongest witch became his protector, broke his curse, and married him.

It suddenly occurred to him that since meeting Tinasha, he'd hardly thought about the Witch of Silence at all. There had been a time when she seemed his final nemesis. Perhaps freedom from the curse had rid him of such burdening ideas.

That's why he thought it unbelievably lucky that he was able to spend the rest of his life with Tinasha.

Oscar caught up a lock of her glossy black hair and pressed a kiss to it.

"Tinasha, can you wake up?" he asked, but she didn't show signs of stirring at all. It was still so early that the sky was only starting to lighten. If he forced her up now, he'd only have a cat sleeping in his study later.

He pulled the covers up to her alabaster shoulders and gave her hair another stroke as he got up to get ready for the day.

As the king, Oscar began his work at the crack of dawn. His queen, however, didn't start until it was nearing noon—and that was on a good day.

When at last she was up, many in Farsas castle city were off to get lunch. A small crowd had gathered around one little house in particular. They were trying to peer in through the stone window frames and catch a glimpse of the beautiful witch who had married their king half a year ago. Word of her coming to this house to examine a sick child had spread like wildfire through the neighborhood.

Amid the noise from outside, Tinasha grimaced as she set out a line of potion bottles on a small table. "I'm sorry for coming so suddenly."

"I-it's quite all right," replied the mother, bowing her head humbly. Next to her was a little boy who couldn't have been older than four, staring up blankly at this strange guest.

Tinasha turned to him and showed him a bottle of light-pink liquid. "Take a sip of this at night before bed, every day until it's gone."

"Is that medicine? Is it yummy?" asked the boy.

"I've made it sweet. I'm sure you'll like it," she assured him with a smile, then turned back toward the front door. She flashed a brilliant smile at the crowd of people gathered outside the window, making eye contact with them. Their curious and adoring gazes only grew more intense.

Tinasha scratched her forehead, a little unsure how to react to that. "I'm waiting for someone from the castle to bring me one more bottle…"

After seeing one of the requests that came to the castle was for a child beset with leg pain of unknown origin, Tinasha had brought over several curatives that could work. But now that she'd examined him in person, she'd decided a different mixture was needed. She had ordered someone to fetch the necessary medicine from the castle, but asking a spirit might have

been faster. However, she wanted to avoid having a nonhuman being take something from the castle supply.

Tinasha took a sip of the tea the family had offered her. Just as she was considering leaving and coming back later, there was a knock at the door, and a young man dressed as a soldier entered.

Her eyes widened, and he bowed to her before setting the bottle on the table. “Is this what you requested, Your Majesty?”

“It is, but…,” she said, trailing off. Then she suddenly pinched the man’s cheek. “Why did you sneak out of the castle, Oscar? I’m going to get mad.”

“Because I heard you did. I came out to play,” answered the disguised king, breaking into a grin. He kissed the witch’s cheek.

“Why do you do things like this?! Don’t you know who you are?” she scolded as they made their way down the main road of the city.

“I do, which is why I changed my clothes. No one notices,” stated Tinasha’s husband.

She shot him a cold glare. “What do you think you’re saying? Quite a lot of people notice. They’re just pretending that they don’t.”

“Are you sure that isn’t just because I stand out when I’m with you?” he replied.

“That has nothing to do with it! Come on, we’re going back now,” Tinasha insisted, pulling her husband along briskly by the hand. She would have preferred to teleport them back, but Oscar had argued, “We’re already outside together, so let’s enjoy it and walk back.”

As they strode down the street, no guards following behind, passersby smiled and watched them go. It was a frequent sight for people in the city, who knew very well just how close the king and queen were.

Oscar pointed to a tailor’s shop along the way. “While we’re here, how about I buy you some clothes?” Oscar suggested.

“I have enough,” Tinasha spat.

“I want to dress you up. It’s fun,” the king countered.

“I don’t care! Ugh, fine! But only three outfits!” Tinasha pouted, her cheeks puffed up, as Oscar pulled her along. As she stood next to him, Oscar began to pick out ensembles from the storefront’s lineup. Very intently, he selected a wide variety, ranging from brightly colored sundresses to a costume that a musician in a foreign country might wear.

Tinasha stared at him in exasperation. “If anything, I’d rather make you change your clothes. Where did you even get that uniform?”

“The laundry room. They were washing a load of them, and I snagged one,” Oscar admitted brazenly.

“I’m going to set up a barrier preventing you from going into the laundry room ever again,” the witch stated mercilessly.

Oscar looked like he wanted to protest but decided he was at a disadvantage and kept quiet. Instead, he pulled out an outfit made entirely in white. “This is good. Unusual design, but it should look nice on you.”

The garment’s entire surface was embroidered with white thread, and while the clothing’s pattern was antique-looking, it was finely crafted. Tinasha’s eyes widened as she took the long robes. “These are wedding robes. People in the mountainous region to the east wear this during their weddings. About a hundred years ago, the weaving method for garments like these was lost. They’re quite a rarity nowadays.”

“Wow, really? That’s perfect, then. Let’s get married,” he said.

“We already are!” protested Tinasha.

“What do you think about renewing our vows every so often? I want to make you wear all sorts of wedding costumes.”

“What in the world…?” Tinasha managed, completely worn down. Oscar burst out laughing. Her look of disbelief at her husband’s antics quickly turned into a smile, as his joy was contagious. She stood up on tiptoe to whisper to him with the robes in her arms, “I’m already as happy as I could be. Let’s stay as we are.”

Oscar broke into a wide grin.

After so many shared ordeals, such tranquil days were now ordinary for them.

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The sky was light and clear that day.

Oscar sighed as he gazed out at the landscape from the windows of his study. He signed the last document and put his pen down. Fortunately, he could end work here for the day; he’d finished everything he needed to handle.

Lazar was making tea, and Oscar asked him, “Where’s Tinasha?”

“She’s gone to her tower today. I think she’s organizing her magic implements,” Lazar answered.

“The tower…,” Oscar mused. The word sounded so nostalgic now. Half a year after their wedding, his wife, the witch, spent most of her time in Farsas. She almost never returned to her former home.

As he thought back over his time as a husband, a smile naturally came to Oscar’s lips. He checked the time and saw that it wasn’t yet close to evening.

“All right, I’m going to the tower, too. If something happens, contact one of the spirits,” Oscar stated.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” replied Lazar.

Oscar went back to his chambers, roused Nark, put the dragon on his shoulder, and then stepped on the transportation array drawn in a corner of the room.

The spell marked on the floor of what used to be the witch’s quarters now led to the first floor of her tower, while this one, drawn after the wedding, connected directly to the spire’s top level.

His surroundings changed in an instant, and Oscar looked around him. The witch's room had many fewer items in it than when he'd first visited, but it was still quite cluttered and messy. He located his wife in the middle of a pile of magic implements and called out, "You okay there?"

"Urgh… This is never-ending," she responded, popping her head up. Her long hair was bound back in a ponytail. Gossip in Farsas and beyond regarded Tinasha as the most beautiful queen. At present, she was dressed in her usual mage's attire because she was in her tower.

Oscar surveyed the array of magic implements laid out all around her. "You've got too many of these. Get rid of some of them."

"I've already destroyed a lot, though…," she protested.

Various ensorcelled objects were piled up in a precarious heap along the wall. Everything collected in that mound was either of unknown origin or too powerful to bring into the Farsas treasure vault.

Unable to physically extricate herself from the many items burying her, Tinasha used short-range teleportation to zip over to Oscar's side.

He tousled her hair affectionately. "I'm done with work for the day, so I'll help."

"Sorry about this… I'll go make some tea," Tinasha said.

"Sure."

"Oh, use these," she appended, holding out what looked like a pair of ordinary leather gloves. "They guard against magic, though not to the degree Akashia does. Some of those things shouldn't be handled barehanded."

"Got it. I appreciate it," Oscar replied.

"I'm the one who should be thankful," Tinasha corrected, floating up to kiss her husband's cheek. Then she disappeared into the kitchen area to make tea. Pulling on the gloves, Oscar faced the mountain of enchanted implements anew. Nark gave a little yawn from his shoulder.

Starting with the objects nearest to him, Oscar sorted them by type. He put a small container of ornaments and jewelry into a basket Tinasha had set aside.

As he worked through the heap, he noticed a slender little wooden box toward the bottom of the pile. It was plain, but what caught his eye were the black finger smudges of a child.

He drew it out, and the mound collapsed in a little. He inspected the box intently. "Is this blood?"

Upon closer inspection, the black traces did appear to be from some ancient wound. Carefully cracking the lid, Oscar discovered an antique necklace made of silver. It was blackened and scuffed, and there was more blood stuck to it.

Turning the cursed-looking thing over, he found that the back of the pendant hanging from the chain was engraved in Old Tuldarr script. He brought his face closer and read, "To Aeti."

"Ah…"

That was his wife's childhood name. It was a moniker she had used only for the first thirteen years of her life.

After that, she had become a witch. While Tinasha was happy now, she had undergone unimaginable suffering to get here. Oscar's heart ached to think of her past. He couldn't bear to imagine the painful experiences she had gone through while out of his reach.

With a deep sigh, he closed the box and placed it in the basket. When he reached for the next item, a little white stone container toppled down from the peak of the pile. Oscar had unbalanced the stack by tugging something from its bottom. "Oops. Dammit…"

A blue jewel rolled out of the package and onto the floor. It looked to be some sort of crystal, and was roughly palm size. Intricate markings decorated the surface. Oscar picked it up, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu. "…I feel like I've seen this before somewhere."

Not at the tower. Probably…inside Farsas Castle.

Suddenly, a sharp pain lanced through his head.

Red of

blood

White nails

His face scrunched up, Oscar bore through the headache. His wife's face flashed through his mind.

"…Ugh, what is this…?"

A spell-induced pain, maybe? A lot of magic certainly surrounded him.

He started by trying to put the orb back in its box, but Oscar realized the markings on the azure orb were glowing a faint white. The hazy light flared up until the entire globe was glowing.

Uh-oh. I need to put this down.

Despite very much wanting to, Oscar discovered he was unable to move. Nark let out a sharp cry from his shoulder.

Drawn by the cry or the light, Tinasha rushed back. "Oscar?!"

Immediately, she realized what was going on and reached for him with a shout. Magic gathered at her hand.

Unfortunately, a second before she could loose her spell, Oscar was engulfed by a pale, overflowing light.

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When the glow subsided, he wasn't holding the blue stone anymore.

Finding that odd, Oscar looked up—and gasped.

He wasn't in the tower room.

He didn't recognize where he was. Alone in the middle of an open grassy plain bordered by forest, Oscar fell to his knees.

"Where the hell am I…?"

Despite his shock, he got to his feet and checked to make sure Nark was on his shoulder and Akashia at his waist. Nark rubbed its head against Oscar's hand when he felt for it.

That magic orb must have had some sort of forced teleportation effect, Oscar mused. But he realized he had a bigger problem.

He couldn't sense the familiar protective barrier on his body.

Normally, the spell his wife had cast was always with him. If he concentrated, he could faintly sense its magic. Yet now, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't.

"Tinasha?" he called.

No one answered. He was alone.

"Okay, let's calm down. First, I'll find out my location. Nark, go," Oscar ordered the dragon, pulling himself together. Nark landed on the ground and grew big. Oscar mounted the creature and rode it slowly into the air. The ground below faded away.

Once up in the clear skies, Oscar surveyed the landscape and realized he recognized what he was looking at. But he also couldn't believe what he was seeing. He commanded Nark to fly east.

After a while, the mountains and forests slowly morphed into a landscape that undoubtedly belonged to Farsas. He turned back to stare at the grassy plain, now a tiny speck in the distance.

"No…tower…"

Maybe he was dreaming.

But he knew with certainty that the grassland he was on was the wasteland home to Tinasha's tower. And there was no spire standing on it now—that much was obvious.

Rubbing his temples, he thought things over for a bit. "Nark, land somewhat close to that town."

Nark did as ordered and took a route heading for a village off in the distance. It finally touched down in a forest not far from the settlement, shrank itself back down, and settled on Oscar's shoulder.

He stroked its back in appreciation, then set off for the village with trepidation. "What place is this…?"

Based on the topography, Oscar knew he was in Farsas, but no one lived out here. Still, there were people here now. Oscar walked in and addressed a woman selling vegetables at the side of the road. "Sorry, but could I ask you something?"

"Oh? Are y'a traveler? We don' get many of those," she replied in a country accent, flashing him a friendly smile.

Oscar wasn't sure where to start, but finally decided to go with the first question that came to mind. "What's the name of this village?"

"It's called Yabat. Doin' big business with lumber and farming," she answered.

Oscar knew the name. However, the Yabat he knew was farther east—and it wasn't a village, but a city.

His head hurt. But he had to ask. “Do you know what year it is?”

“What *year*? You from some other country? Goin’ by Farsas reckoning, it’s 108.”

Black spots swam before Oscar’s eyes, and he staggered a step.

He’d traveled 419 years into the past.

Unable to take in that fact so abruptly, Oscar could only stand there in a daze.

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She spent almost her entire day studying.

Previously, a tutor would come to the house for five hours every day to teach her all sorts of things, including magic. Starting last year, however, she had gotten so proficient that there was no longer anyone who could teach her.

That was why she spent a large portion of her time doing self-study. When she was younger, she used to get taken out to explore faraway places, but now there was hardly anything she could do freely, even for herself. This room, the detached wing it was in, and a group of less than twenty adults were the only world she knew.

She paused, about to take down a copy of a spell book. According to the clock, it was almost time for bed. The room had grown very dark. Only the desk lamp and pale moonlight filtering through the window illuminated the chamber.

She stretched her back, stiff from leaning over her desk, and began to put away the books she had open. As she did, she glanced out the window. A barrier had been placed in its pane in place of glass.

A white moon hung in the night sky, with not a cloud to be seen. She narrowed her eyes as she looked at it, then turned her back on the window. Once she’d straightened up, she would lie down for the night.

An unknown presence suddenly darkened the moonlight pouring in from the window. She turned her head back to inspect it.

Something was off.

The slightest sensation of discord, imperceptible to a regular person, nudged at her unmistakably. Maybe someone had broken in past the barrier set up around the detached wing.

She crept silently to the window, leaned out, and looked around. But nothing appeared out of the ordinary in the dark garden. *Maybe it was my imagination…*, she thought, but she decided to let someone know anyway, just in case. She headed for the door, but her ears caught the faint sound of someone stepping on the rocks.

“……”

She turned back, reflexively casting a spell. Her gaze fell on someone standing by the window, where just a moment ago, there had been nothing at all.

The person’s features were indistinct, backlit by the moonlight. In that instant, she hurled a spear made of magic at them. Her power was great enough to incapacitate someone with a single blow. Much to her surprise, however, the spell struck the intruder’s sword and vanished.

“What…?” she gasped, stunned by such an impossible turn of events. As she started to draw up a defensive spell, she growled, “Who are you?!”

The intruder sighed in relief at her harsh query. “I actually got the right window? That’s lucky.”

The voice was masculine. The uninvited guest jumped down into the room. As she was about to launch more magic at him, he pressed close to her and covered her mouth while pushing the flat of his sword against her belly.

“I have no intention of harming you. Just don’t make a fuss. I need something from you, Tinasha,” he said. Her eyes grew round and wide in shock. She was filled with suspicion over this strange man calling her by a name no one normally used.

Shaking the intruder off, she attempted to prepare another spell, but curiously found herself unable to summon up her magic. This had never happened before. Stunned, she looked up at him.

He was gorgeous.

A pained look was in his eyes, which were the color of the sky just after sunset. Unlike all the other adults she knew, he had a body trained and honed for battle, and his strength made a chill run up her spine. She nodded.

With that understanding established, he pulled his hand away from her mouth and released her.

“Who are you?” the girl asked in a quavering voice.

Wincing a little to hear it, he answered, “I’m the man you’ll marry someday.”

After the man—Oscar—freed her and explained himself, Tinasha felt deeply disturbed. “Are you all right in the head?”

“If this is a dream, I wish I’d wake up from it,” he admitted openly.

The lovely young girl frowned, not sure how to interpret his words. Tinasha had been raised in the castle since her birth, and people had raved about her unparalleled looks for as long as she could remember. But her beauty now was as yet incomplete, her features markedly childlike.

Tinasha’s long black hair was bound up in a high ponytail. She went ahead and sat down on her wide bed. The man sat on the couch by the window and petted the tiny dragon sleeping next to him.

“There’s no magical law about returning to the past. It’s impossible,” she stated plainly.

“Yes, and you’ve told me that before. So this has to be a dream. Hurry and snap me out of it,” Oscar insisted.

“Why do I have to?!” she cried.

The intruder who claimed to be from four hundred years in the future folded his arms and stared at her. Tinasha shifted uncomfortably under that gaze. “In the first place, the human life span is only seventy years! It doesn’t make sense that you’d be my husband! Are you actually over four hundred? Are you telling me that your younger self is alive somewhere in my time?”

Oscar could only laugh at those questions, though he didn’t answer. He told her they were married, but refused to reveal the full story of how it had happened. His story was inconsistent, and Tinasha pressed her fingers to her temples.

Oscar gave a faint smile, looking legitimately concerned. “In any case, I need your help. I want to go back to my era.”

“I told you, it’s not possible to travel through time… A magic sleep might sustain you for four centuries, but men’s bodies are unstable, so that wouldn’t be the ideal plan. I couldn’t guarantee anything,” admitted Tinasha.

“Is there no other way?” he pressed.

“No,” she answered bluntly. However, when she saw his eyes fill with profound anguish, she felt a twinge of guilt.

Tinasha didn’t know what he was thinking, but he had come expressly to her. It didn’t sit well with her to treat him disdainfully. She had minimal experience dealing with other people.

Getting up from the bed, she came to stand in front of him. “Do you have no other hope?”

“I really don’t.”

“I see…,” she said, hesitating for a while before making up her mind and sitting down next to him. “In that case…I’ll do some research. You can stay here until then. Not many people come to this wing, and no one should notice as long as I cast an invisibility spell on you.”

“Really?” he asked before breathing a sigh of relief and patting her head.

Tinasha felt taken aback at the warm feeling. “It might take some time. Is that all right?”

“Yeah. Sorry about this,” the intruder replied, giving her a smile.

Tinasha felt relieved. It was a very fishy story, but even so, she didn’t want to disappoint him. Until now, she had lived alone in this wing, seeing only a very select few people. Such a repetitive existence would undoubtedly have seemed lonely to others, but the girl didn’t know enough to feel dissatisfied with it.

Perhaps she had grown starved for human connection without even knowing it.

Feeling oddly drawn to this man who had appeared out of nowhere, she stared at him. He winced. “I appreciate it, but don’t act so defenseless around a stranger.”

“You’re one to talk,” Tinasha retorted. This man sure was strange. Still, he didn’t seem malicious. Now that she felt reassured, a backlash of

sleepiness hit her. Oscar watched her cover a little yawn with her hand and stood up.

"You should go to sleep. I'll find an empty room to use," he stated.

"What? But here is fine," she protested.

Yes, there were empty rooms in her wing, but almost none were in use, and they lacked proper furniture. The only chamber someone could stay in was her room.

However, when Oscar heard that, he looked appalled. "Listen…I *just* told you not to be so defenseless…"

"If you're in another room, I won't be able to cover for you if someone finds you," Tinasha pointed out. She could cast an invisibility spell, but such powerful magic had limitations. It was much easier for them to stay in the same room. And…on the off chance that he *had* snuck into her wing with another purpose in mind, it was all the more reason to want him where she could keep an eye on him.

Tinasha turned back toward her bed. "I don't take up very much room, so I shouldn't bother you. Unless you like girls on the younger side?"

"Stop it; that's a damaging accusation. How old are you anyway?" he asked.

"Thirteen," she replied.

The man froze up a little at that. Tinasha noticed and stared back at him suspiciously. "What is it?"

"No… It's nothing. I'll stay here, then, so you should get to sleep. You have a hard time waking up in the mornings, don't you?" he said.

"How do you know that…?"

"Just go to sleep," he repeated, ruffling her hair and pushing her toward the mattress.

He thought she'd scold him a bit more, but she accepted his proposal without much resistance. Most likely, that was because she was still just a girl. Tinasha looked sour after he nudged her head, but she obediently lay down nonetheless.

Oscar sat next to her and stroked her hair gently.

Gentle hands. An unfamiliar warmth.

All of it spoke of abiding love, and she felt her body relaxing.

Was it true that she would marry him in the future? The doubt faded as quickly as it had come. Regardless, it did seem that he meant no harm.

She was a candidate for queen. If he wanted to kill her, he could have done so already, yet he hadn't. So how much of what he'd said was the truth? Whether his story was a lie or not, the man undoubtedly needed help.

"Good night, Tinasha," he murmured.

"…Good night," she whispered back. It was her first time exchanging that phrase with another.

She wasn't used to hearing her own name. His hushed words felt soothing to her.

As a strange sense of fulfillment swept over her, she closed her eyes.

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The next morning, Oscar woke her up. With sleepy eyes, she headed for the kitchen and made breakfast for them. The spacious dining room had no servants, and Oscar inclined his head in bemusement as she set down their plates on the table. “You’re a potential queen, and you have to cook your own food?”

“Politically, things have been tense lately… There’s a chance I could be killed, so I decided to start doing just about everything myself. Although previously I seldom saw anyone besides my tutor anyway,” she explained.

“That’s some life you’ve got,” remarked Oscar, sighing as he took a sip of tea.

His own boyhood and adolescence had been equally busy, filled with nothing but studying and training, but he had never felt isolated like this. There was always someone nearby wanting to talk to him.

Tinasha was the heir to a throne, just as Oscar had been, yet she was always by herself. Oscar stared at her, sitting across from him at the table. “Aren’t you lonely?”

“What? A little, but that’s just how things are,” she answered, finding the question odd. Oscar didn’t know how to reply.

Once before, he’d asked her that same question and received a similar response.

He wanted to tell her that wasn’t how things were supposed to be. However, it would be four hundred years before he would truly meet her.

His face had clouded over, and Tinasha rushed to wave her hands reassuringly. “I’m just fine. I might be by myself, but I’m not really alone. I have my country. That’s why I need to study—to protect my people. I don’t want to run into difficulties in the future, so I’m doing my best,” she said with a grin. It made his heart ache.

Oscar wanted to make sure of something he’d been thinking about since the night before. “How long until your next birthday?”

“My birthday? About half a year…,” she answered.

As Oscar ate, he pondered. Tinasha was thirteen when she became a witch. So the great tragedy of her life would befall her sometime in the next six months.

“If this isn’t a dream… But even so,” he whispered, too low for her to hear. An odd exhilaration and anxiety rose up within him.

What would happen if he saved her from disaster?

She wouldn’t become a witch. And then…she wouldn’t meet him.

Though if he stayed in this era…

Oscar got that far before he made a face at himself. It was pointless to think about such things. He had his own citizens to protect. And he had the Tinasha of four hundred years later. He knew she must be worried about

him now. Once he got back, he might be in for a flood of lecturing. The thought of which made him grimace.

As she ate her breakfast with impeccable table manners, Tinasha asked, "…So why did you land in the past? Did something happen?"

"Yeah…," Oscar began, looking up from his mire of thoughts. He thought back over what had happened at the tower. "I was sorting through some magic implements. And there was this orb… It was blue, with sigils carved on the surface. All of a sudden, it started to glow, and the next thing I knew, I was here in this time."

"I haven't heard of any object like that," Tinasha stated.

"It was one I'd seen somewhere before," he informed her.

"Do you remember where you encountered it the first time?" pressed the girl.

"I'm trying."

Oscar closed his eyes. He knew the little sphere looked familiar, but couldn't manage to place it.

The memory still just out of reach, he helped Tinasha clean up, and they returned to her room.

Tinasha took down several old, large tomes from the bookshelves lining one wall and spread them out on the desk. She promptly sat and flipped to the index at the back of each volume. Almost immediately, she was absorbed in her task; Oscar went to stand by the window.

Then she thought of something and asked him, "What's that sword you have?"

"This? It's a magic-neutralizing sword," he said, giving a point-blank explanation.

Tinasha frowned. "There's only one of those in the world. Akashia of Farsas."

"That's what it is."

"What…? You're a member of the Farsas royal family?" she asked.

"Yes."

"……"

An indescribable look on her face, the girl shook her head two or three times before turning back to the books. Oscar wondered if his claim had robbed him of more credibility. Yet if he lied about it here, she would only end up doubting him more if something happened later. Oscar glanced at the hilt of the royal sword, which jogged a sudden memory from the past.

"…Oh," he muttered.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I remembered. I saw it in the Farsas treasure vault. It was red, but…"

Right—it was the same orb that the girl who broke into the castle and summoned the demonic beast had been trying to steal from the vault. The color was different, but the size and the markings were unmistakable.

As Oscar recalled that, another headache came on.

I'm still forgetting something…

He was searching through his recollections when Tinasha asked, “So should we go to Farsas?”

“…No, it was one of my mother’s heirlooms. It wouldn’t be in Farsas yet,” he answered.

“Did your mother die?”

“When I was a kid, yeah.”

“I see…,” Tinasha replied, wilting before his eyes as she seemed to regret her blunt inquiry.

Oscar walked over to her and patted the top of her head lightly. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t remember it.”

“Okay… I’m sorry,” she apologized. He found her honest reaction adorable and couldn’t help smiling. It was hardly the time for that, however. The important thing was to continue searching for a solution to Oscar’s predicament.

“Yeah, it wouldn’t be in Farsas. And it was a different color… Where did the one in the tower come from…?”

The girl cocked her head curiously. In her face, Oscar could see traces of his wife’s features. He pored over his memories of the inside of the tower.

That box was on top of the pile of magic implements. That means she brought it in recently. And she sent a lot of magic implements to the tower back when—

“…The Tuldarr treasure vault?” he mused.

Tinasha’s eyes widened as she looked up at him. Immediately, she shuddered. “No way. I can’t get in without the king’s permission. Besides, I don’t trust you that much.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t. Sorry,” Oscar said. He couldn’t do anything about that. Even if he insisted that she let him into the repository, she’d only think he was lying because he wanted to steal from it. If he didn’t gain more of her trust, he wouldn’t make it deeper into Tuldarr.

Oscar stroked her hair. “It took a lot of time to tame you before, too…”

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he responded with a smile.

Tinasha frowned at him suspiciously before going back to her books.

It took three more hours for her to look through all of them.

“I—I couldn’t find anything…”

“I’m sorry you wasted all that effort.”

Tinasha’s eyes undoubtedly ached after parsing so much text. Rubbing at them, she got up and flopped onto the bed. Oscar came to sit next to her. She threw her arms over her face, but after a while, she exhaled and pulled them away. “Hey, what’s that?” she asked, pointing at Oscar’s chest.

“What’s what?” he asked.

“There’s an incredibly complicated curse and blessing intertwined within your body. They’re canceling each other out, though, so you probably don’t feel much of an effect.”

“Oh, that. You can see it?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed.

Oscar looked down, but he couldn’t detect a thing.

One of the two intertwined spells had been placed by the witch who’d determined the course of his life. His wife had set the other. She *had* told him that, strictly speaking, she hadn’t broken the curse.

With a grimace, Oscar slapped a hand to his chest. “When I was a kid, I got a blessing put on me that was a little too powerful. To cancel it out, I had a curse put on.”

“Wow. They’re both expertly woven, the likes of which I’ve never seen before. Could I get some of your blood later? I want to analyze it,” Tinasha stated.

“Sure. Do you enjoy that sort of work?”

“I love research. I’ve gotta try everything,” Tinasha eagerly replied.

Oscar nodded. Then something occurred to him, and he clapped his hands together.

Tinasha’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Have you ever used a sword?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then I’ll give you a lesson. Let’s go outside.”

“*Whaaat?*” the girl exclaimed, drawing out the word in her shock. She sat up. “I’ve never done any physical training… Just walking…”

“The very portrait of a mage. But that’s not good enough for royalty. Mages who seize up with fear make easy targets.”

“R-really?” she inquired, clearly flustered. She had never heard that before.

Oscar smiled. “I’m positive a little combat knowledge will come in handy someday. Come on.”

Originally, Tinasha had learned to use a sword after becoming a witch. Still, there was no harm in her getting an early start.

Tinasha stared up at him. Then she gave a reluctant nod. “Okay. What should we do?”

“You’ll need a practice sword. Can you get one?” he asked her.

“Easily. I just have to ask, and I can get anything brought to me,” Tinasha answered, nodding without hesitation. But that was only because she was neglected, despite being a potential queen. She lived in solitude, and none of the people outside would have anything to do with her. They just provided her with things. This was proof of the warped life she was living, and Oscar’s lips twisted bitterly.

Tinasha noticed the expression and frantically waved her hands. “It’s fine. It’s easier on me this way. And it’s more convenient for you, too, isn’t it?”

“Forget about me. I’m going to look after you,” Oscar declared.

“…Okay. Thank you,” she said, and she blushed happily.

Tinasha summoned the lady-in-waiting assigned to her wing. The servant seemed puzzled at her young lady’s request but did as bidden and brought

two practice swords. She was also suspicious that this girl had asked for men's clothing the day before, but it was an unwritten rule not to interfere in Tinasha's affairs.

Tinasha thanked her and took the weapons. Then, quite unusually, she raced off down the hallway with an air of anticipation.

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"Oh, right, Oscar, I heard an interesting story the other day," the witch mentioned.

They were in their bedroom, some few weeks after getting married.

A nighttime drizzle was falling. It was dark outside the window, and the rain sounded like the roar of the sea.

The queen had her arms wrapped around her knees as she sat in bed. She was breathtakingly beautiful. Her beauty had never been in question, but now that she was queen, she exuded an even more radiant charm. At least, that was what Oscar thought, and as no one else could say anything disrespectful about her, he might have been the only one who saw her that way.

Lying facedown next to her, he tugged on a lock of hair cascading over her naked alabaster body. "An interesting story? What was it?"

"It's a tale passed down in the village near the fortress of Minnedart," she answered. The settlement she spoke of had been destroyed in a raid. The anecdote Tinasha recounted had been passed down orally for two centuries.

"A tribe of horse riders—most likely the Ito—pillaged the town. A swordsman protected a woman in the village from the raiders, but purportedly, he was actually her son," she explained.

"Her son? How old was he?" Oscar inquired.

"Oh—sorry, I don't know his exact age. He was supposed to be the same age as the woman. The tale is about how he came from the future and went back in time to save his mother, whom the Ito would have otherwise abducted. He was the offspring of the woman and an Ito rider."

"…Huh," Oscar replied. It was certainly an interesting little legend.

Tinasha smiled at Oscar's interest and added, "That said, I told you before that there's no law in magic that allows time travel. So the account is probably some trumped-up myth, but I found it interesting. It's a little melancholy."

"How so?" he asked. Based on what he'd heard, it sounded like a fantastical tale of heroism.

Tinasha narrowed her obsidian eyes as she smiled at him. "Because if that young man saved his mother from getting abducted, it meant he wouldn't be born in the future. But even knowing that, he still saved her."

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Two weeks had passed since Oscar came to Tinasha's wing in Tuldarr.

It had gone by in a flash, and the two of them had developed a strange lifestyle together.

The girl would investigate Oscar's predicament, conduct her research, and study swordsmanship.

Oscar was her teacher when it came to the blade, but he proved to be a capable tutor in other fields as well. He possessed more than enough knowledge on matters of history, geography, politics, law, and how to govern a country as a royal. The man was much better versed in real-world official duties than any in Tuldarr, a nation that prized powerful mages above all else. To Tinasha, he was like a magician of a different sort.

"Oscar, what did you do in Farsas? You must be a royal heir if you have that sword," she said.

"Hmm, I wonder," he answered, patting her on her head the way he always did.

He watched over her tenderly and seemed to fall into thought at random times.

They were not like a teacher and student, or like family members, or even like a pair of lovers.

Their relationship was simple, warm, and certain. Before long, Tinasha grew attached to her odd companion.

"This dragon is so friendly," Tinasha remarked with a grin, petting Nark after the creature landed on her head in the middle of sword practice in the garden.

Across from her, Oscar lowered his sword and made a face. "Not to most. It's gentle because it knows you. You're the one who originally gave it to me."

"Really?" Tinasha questioned.

"Yeah."

The girl cocked her head quizzically.

All of Oscar's claims about the future still seemed difficult to believe.

Above all else, the two were separated by four hundred years. The marriage part had to be a lie meant to tease her.

Even so, Tinasha couldn't help but grow curious when Oscar recounted things about a version of herself that she didn't know. After some hesitation, she looked up at Oscar and asked, "Hey, what am I like later on?"

"A fine-looking woman. The only one of her class."

"Wh-what does that mean…?" Tinasha squeaked, looking away. That embarrassed her.

She had almost dared to hope for something, but it was quashed before she could recognize the sensation for what it was. A smile was tugging at her lips, but she suppressed it and puffed out her cheeks. "Even though the part about us being wed is a fib!"

"Well, I guess it does sound like one. But—"

Oscar stepped up to her and poked the left side of her waist. “I know you have a mole here.”

Amazed, Tinasha dropped her gaze to the place he’d prodded, and she flushed bright red. “When did you see that?!”

“When…? We’re married; of course I saw it,” Oscar answered.

“I—I don’t understand…”

“Don’t think about it too deeply,” he said with a chuckle.

Tinasha’s thoughts were starting to spiral down into a maze, and she shook her head. Just then, she heard footsteps coming closer. She recited a short incantation to reinforce the invisibility spell on Oscar.

The lady-in-waiting assigned to her wing appeared shortly after. Her face fell for a moment when she caught sight of Tinasha in training clothes, but her expression quickly recovered. The servant offered an ostensibly courteous bow. “So this is where you went, Lady Aeti.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Prince Lanak will be here soon. Please go back to your room,” instructed the lady-in-waiting.

“Lanak is coming?! I’ll be right there,” Tinasha replied excitedly, and Oscar frowned.

The lady-in-waiting departed swiftly, and Oscar’s face was pinched as he asked, “Lanak’s coming?”

“You know who he is? I think he’s been busy lately, but he comes to see me a lot,” answered Tinasha, exuding innocent joy.

In contrast, Oscar looked grim. He warned her, “Be careful. Call for me if anything happens.”

“What could happen?” the girl questioned.

Oscar didn’t answer. His handsome face was wiped of expression as he collected Nark and sat down on a large stone placed in the garden.

Tinasha frowned, confused, but hurried off to get ready.

Once back in her room, she wiped her hands, changed clothes, and tidied her hair.

Nearly right after she finished getting herself in order, Lanak arrived. His long white hair was tied back behind him. When he saw Tinasha, he gave her a thin smile. “It’s been a while, Aeti. Have you been well?”

“Mm-hmm. Have you?” she replied. It had been so long that she didn’t know what to say. Part of her felt thrilled, while another bit felt shy. Still, the girl beamed at him.

Lanak presented her with a flat box wrapped in cloth. “Here, this is for you.”

“What is it?” she inquired, taking the box and opening it. Inside was a gorgeous necklace wrought of silver. The silversmith’s skill was evident in the fine craftsmanship, and Tinasha was immediately fascinated by it.

“I had it made for you,” stated Lanak.

“Thank you…,” Tinasha murmured, picking it up carefully. She turned over the hanging pendant to find her name engraved on the back. Her grin widening, she donned the necklace.

Lanak’s head tilted incrementally as he watched her. “It looks good on you.”

“I love it,” she said, blushing as she gazed right into Lanak’s eyes.

That’s right. She had him. There was no way she’d marry some other man.

Oscar’s claim must have been a joke meant to tease her over being so sheltered. It wasn’t something the young woman felt angry over, but she did recognize that she’d nearly fallen for his blatant lie.

With a deep sigh, Tinasha brushed away her inner turmoil. She ignored the traces of loneliness that had settled in her heart.

Reassured, she gave Lanak a kittenish look, and he approached her. Placing a hand on her ivory cheek, he kissed her forehead. Giggling, Tinasha closed her eyes.

His hand slid from her cheek to her alabaster nape, around which hung the necklace.

As he touched her slender, breakable neck, there was something cold and emotionless in his gaze.

Tinasha missed it, however, because she had her eyes closed.

“…Aeti.”

“What?” she said, opening her eyes to look at him.

Lanak’s smile was strained. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I know I only just arrived, but I have to go now.”

“Okay…,” Tinasha responded, her shoulders sagging a little. Ever since things in Tuldarr got rocky, he wouldn’t come and spend time with her the way he used to.

But that was merely how it had to be. Unlike Tinasha, who only spent her time studying, Lanak had the many responsibilities that came with being the king’s son—even more so now that his father was ill. Tinasha couldn’t go on forever acting like his baby sister and making selfish demands of him. She had to become his queen soon.

Tinasha watched Lanak go. But when he placed his hand on the door, she remembered something. “Oh! Lanak, wait.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Um… I’d like to enter the treasure vault…,” she said, broaching the subject timidly. Her sudden request made Lanak turn back to face her.

He stared at her quizzically. “Why?”

“I’m currently studying magic implements…and some of the ones I’m researching might be kept in there. I’d like to look for them…”

“All right. I’ll ask Father,” Lanak agreed.

“Thank you!” Tinasha cried. At last, she could confirm Oscar’s recollection. Relieved, the girl broke into a smile.

Lanak returned the expression and departed.

"…I'm so glad," she sighed. They had gotten to spend only a short time together, but it had still been wonderful.

Tinasha gazed at herself in the mirror. The silver necklace was a bit too mature for her, but it still made her happy. It made her feel like she was stretching herself up tall and growing up, if only a little.

I wonder if this necklace would look good on the adult version of me that Oscar knows?

She tried to imagine a taller Tinasha standing side by side with Oscar, but hurriedly cut off that train of thought. "No, no… I belong to Tuldarr."

If that sword of his was really Akashia, that meant he was a royal of Farsas. Someone who had dedicated her life to Tuldarr couldn't possibly marry a man from another country.

Perhaps she'd wed him for political reasons after something happened to Tuldarr in the future?

Tinasha's head was spinning with all the possibilities she could envision. However, when she remembered that her odd houseguest also claimed to be from four centuries later, the inexplicability drowned all that out. She puffed out her flushed cheeks. "Hmph… I'm not gonna think about it."

"What aren't you going to think about?" inquired a sudden voice, and Tinasha jumped.

She turned around to see Oscar standing in the doorway. "Y-you scared me… I didn't hear you coming…"

"Oh, sorry. You're always complaining to me about that, and I—"

His words trailed off. He stared at her, recognition dawning in his dusk-colored eyes. Tinasha drew back from the intensity of that gaze, but then she realized what he was looking at. "Oh, this necklace? Lanak gave it to me."

When Oscar heard that, his face very obviously darkened. Tinasha had never seen him so glowering.

"Take it off," he demanded.

"What? Wh-why?" she asked, staring in wonder at his sudden demand. Where was this all coming from?

With a stern look, he continued to insist. "Just take it off. Don't wear it again."

"Don't wear it again? But Lanak gave it to me," she protested.

"You shouldn't trust him," Oscar stated flatly.

"What…?"

The girl couldn't understand what he was saying. She ruminated on his words.

She'd thought he'd be happy for her.

Now she could get into the treasure vault. Finally, she could be helpful to him.

That was why she'd bothered Lanak with her request…but Oscar's reaction was completely unexpected.

“…You don’t know anything about Lanak…”

Tinasha’s earliest memory was of Lanak smiling and holding his hands out to her. Though embarrassed, he looked happy as he reached to hug her.

It was that embrace that had sustained the girl the entire time she’d been living all alone.

She knew nothing, and he guided her forward.

“He’s the only family I have.”

Red tinged the edges of her vision as anger overtook her. She stood frozen in place, her lips trembling.

She didn’t have many memories of getting angry. It was hard to breathe. She felt faint. A wave of dizziness swept over Tinasha as she clenched both hands into fists.

The girl thought that would make Oscar understand, but his reply was heartless. “No. He’s going to hurt you.”

“Wha…?”

Never had she seen her guest’s eyes look so cold before. What he declared was difficult for her to accept.

“What do you know?” The hoarse voice that demanded an explanation didn’t sound like Tinasha’s own. Her throat felt hot. Her legs were shaking. The heat soon morphed into fury. “You know nothing about me… Don’t just spout nonsense!”

Her angry shout surprised even her, but she could no longer stop herself. Like a dam bursting on the muck of emotions she always kept bottled up, she screamed as she tore at her black hair, “Lanak is the only one who’s been there for me! He’s the only one who’s ever looked at me! I don’t have anyone else! Without him—I’m truly alone!”

How many years had it been since Tinasha had thrown a fit like a child? Even she didn’t know quite what she was trying to say. She didn’t want to cry, but tears spilled forth.

She was out of control, ranting and raving and unable to stop it. Suddenly, Oscar pulled her into his arms.

He held her tight, but she pounded on his chest with all her might. “Let go of me! Idiot!”

Yet he refused to release her, no matter how hard she struck him. The man remained undaunted as she battered his chest and cursed at herself and the world with everything she had.

“I-I’m not okay being alone! But someone has to do it! So I’ve always held it in! I thought it would get better once I grew up—”

The deserted wing was so vast and wide.

Whenever Tinasha looked back and saw an empty corridor, she felt as though she had no place in the world. It would’ve been wrong of her to complain about it, though. She was blessed to be where she was. Royals couldn’t save the common people if they anguished over such trivial things.

Saying that she hated being alone was improper.

“It’s so stupid! I’m not some unfeeling thing that can suffer through all of this! I want to see my dad and my mom! I want to be a normal girl just for one lousy day! I-I’ve actually always—”

Tinasha longed to sit around a dinner table with her family. She was so jealous of children who could sleep next to their mothers, whose fathers would lead them by the hand.

All she wanted was the smallest bit of warmth. Even the tiniest bit would be enough—she could continue on alone after that.

“…Ngh, ah…”

Overwhelmed, she couldn’t form words anymore.

It was so big and so much that she couldn’t say it, so what came out instead was racking sobs.

Loud wails resounded.

Tinasha didn’t know what she was crying for or why it was so painful, but an endless flood of hot tears spilled over her cheeks and onto Oscar’s chest.

He stroked her hair gently. “It’s all right, Tinasha. You’re not going to be alone forever. I guarantee it. You will reach me, and you’ll be happy.”

Tinasha couldn’t answer. Her bawling wouldn’t stop. Still, she had a curious feeling that told her he was speaking the truth this time. With a little nod, her hot eyelids fluttered down as if she were going to bed.

Tinasha cried herself to sleep, and Oscar laid her out on the bed, then sat down next to her and sighed.

This was too much for him to endure. He was too impatient. While he would heal her loneliness eventually, it was a long way off. Forcing that poor girl to wait four hundred years felt so absurd that Oscar hung his head, dejected.

There was also something that had been bothering him this whole time.

If this was reality, then when was “now”?

Was everyone worrying and waiting for him to come back to his original time?

Now that he had met Tinasha as a girl, her past had unquestionably been altered. As time passed in this reality, would it still lead to the world where he was born? Or would it branch off into a similar but different one? This was a significant problem to consider.

“…Tinasha,” he murmured, meaning not the girl sleeping next to him but his wife. After becoming queen, she had told him a folk tale passed down in the village near the fortress of Minnedart. It was indeed very similar to his situation. At the time, Tinasha had laughed it off as a made-up, impossible tale, but Oscar was living proof that time travel was more than a legend. Which meant that the story was also—

Paling a little, Oscar gazed at the girl sleeping by his side. “It’s only natural that you’d feel lonely.”

How could she not be? Oscar had thought the same thing upon meeting his witch.

Feeling that he'd just sigh if he opened his mouth, Oscar stayed silent.

Outside the window, the moon was still glittering silver.

Tinasha was not a morning person, and that was true of her younger self, too.

When she woke up the next day, she sat in bed for a while, staring into space. Her eyes were still a bit swollen as she turned to look at Oscar, sitting on the couch by the window.

He was debating how to respond to her when she muttered, "…I'm sorry."

Awkwardly, but more apprehensively than anything, she cast him a look. The expression so very much resembled the sort his wife made. A smile tugged at his lips as he remembered it fondly. "It's okay. I didn't phrase what I said well. I know how hard you're trying."

Tinasha worked harder than most her age. While that was only to be expected of one possessed of such incredible magic, she was still a mere girl of thirteen. Oscar stood and walked over to the bed. He wiped away the tear tracks on her cheeks. "Since I'm here and all, why don't we go have fun somewhere? I'll take you outside."

He'd been considering the idea for days now. Even if Tinasha didn't know any transportation coordinates since she never left her wing, Nark could take them outside and bring them back. It would be distracting and relaxing for her to go out in town. Perhaps she could even visit her parents.

At Oscar's proposal, Tinasha's eyes widened for a moment. A flicker of something that was not quite hope flashed across her face.

However, soon after, she closed her eyes and smiled. "Thank you…very much. But it's all right. I'd get in trouble if they found out I left."

"I get busted for that all the time, and people are always getting mad at me for it," Oscar admitted. It was the truth, but Tinasha thought it was a joke and laughed out loud.

She scooted over on the bed, setting her legs down next to him. "Right now, I'm having more than enough fun, so I'm really all right."

"You sure?"

"I can listen to you, and you'll listen to me. Isn't that already a pretty lucky thing?" she said, beaming sunnily. Oscar looked into her eyes carefully, but her grin didn't seem like a show of courage—the girl honestly felt that way.

"You might be overestimating me, and I'm not sure how to feel about that," Oscar confessed.

"Well, this sort of thing doesn't normally happen. You know, my self-proclaimed husband coming to see me."

"Self-proclaimed…"

It hurt to hear that again, but a fact was a fact. Tinasha took one look at the man's unusually dour expression and burst out laughing. Maybe she felt a little more at ease now that she'd gotten out all those bottled-up things.

Tinasha hugged her knees to her chest. “Anyway, tell me about the future. If it’s true, that means I’m older than you, right?”

“Why do you think that?” Oscar asked.

He’d told her they were married in the future, but he’d left out the part about her becoming a witch. So of course she wouldn’t have any idea about their age gap.

But Tinasha grinned at his reaction. “Because, Oscar, you told me that the orb was your mother’s heirloom, so it wouldn’t be in Farsas yet. That means you haven’t been born yet, either.”

“…Oh, right.”

“So I’m older, right?” she pressed, smiling mischievously.

Oscar grimaced. “It never really felt like you were, but I guess that’s true.”

“But if that’s four hundred years from now, does that mean Tuldarr people have exceptionally long lives? Is there going to be some big innovation in magical arts?”

“That’s a secret.”

“Hmph, too bad. But I guess it’s not good to know too many things about the future,” Tinasha accepted. Yet her eyes still sparkled with curiosity. “Where did we meet? What did you think the first time we met?”

“Listen, you…”

She was acting like Lucrezia, having a ball with gossipy stories. It *was* her own life, though—it was understandable that she was curious about it.

A faint smile on his lips, Oscar recalled the witch’s tower. “I came to ask you to break the curse placed on me. But you were incredibly beautiful and not at all what I had expected. You looked like…an ordinary girl, who happened to be terribly gorgeous.”

That felt like such a long time ago now. In this era, when the tower didn’t exist yet, it was a precious memory.

Tinasha listened to Oscar raptly, like a kitten who had found a new treasure. Her big black eyes were locked on to him. “And then what? Did you get married right away?”

“…I don’t want to reveal too much of my hand. You turned down my proposals a lot.”

“What? That’s so weird,” she giggled. It was like this story didn’t seem real to her.

That’s why broaching what he did was such a gamble.

“The year 527 by Farsas reckoning.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“That’s the year we got married. About four centuries from now.”

Undoubtedly that seemed too distant to feel tangible at all, but Oscar hoped that the young Tinasha could find some comfort in the fact during the days to come.

So Oscar gazed evenly at his wife, not yet a witch. “I’ll wait for you there. And I promise I’ll make you happy,” he vowed, his words laden with hope.

Tinasha was amazed. Her eyes shone, and she could almost burst into tears again…but this time, she smiled happily.

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A week later, Lanak came to grant her entry into the treasure vault.

However, that didn’t mean she could waltz in and look around freely. She would go as Lanak’s attendant and search for the magic implement in question while accompanying him.

Aware that Oscar didn’t think much of Lanak, Tinasha was on edge when she explained this to him, but he merely replied, “I hope you find it. Be careful.”

Magic lights filled the vault.

“Wow…,” Tinasha breathed, letting out a cry of wonder at the repository filled with magic implements. Lanak had led her by the hand downstairs to the place. The young man looked used to the sight.

He gave a slight grin at Tinasha’s reaction. “I asked my father, but you won’t be allowed to take anything out. Sorry.”

“No, that’s fine. Thank you,” she said, smiling at him.

Tinasha began her search for the orb, looking everywhere. According to Oscar, it was in a small white stone box. Systematically, she went through each place where such a container could be placed.

“Shall I help you? What are you looking for?” inquired Lanak.

“O-oh, thank you. But I’m fine. I don’t even know if it’s here…”

“Are you sure? Well, say something if you need me,” Lanak replied before going to lean against the wall and read.

While he paged through a book, Tinasha briskly expanded her search radius. An hour later, she reached out to a shelf far in the back. Pushing aside the figurines and packages in the front, she noticed something almost hidden behind them. She stretched up on her tiptoes and drew it out carefully.

It was a little white stone box.

Her heart leaped, though she opened the lid very gently. A blue orb the size of one’s palm resided within. Its surface was inlaid with markings.

“…It really was here…,” she whispered with surprise. Then she snapped back to herself and moved it to the front of the shelf, where it would be easy to find.

After checking to make sure Lanak was absorbed in his book, she began to hum a quiet incantation.

“Oscar!” Tinasha shouted, bounding into the room.

The man was by the window. She almost crashed into him, and he opened his arms to catch her. She was practically jumping up and down

with excitement, and he put a hand on her head to calm her down. “How did it go?”

“It was really there!” she exclaimed.

“I see,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief. If this magic implement induced forced teleportation, chances were high he could return by using it again—and even more so considering it had sent him into the past on its own the first time. Initially, this magic implement must have made round trips, but the mage who used it had likely gotten separated from the object by traveling too far through time.

“So what should we do?” he asked.

“I couldn’t take it out, so I tampered with the treasure vault. I’ve set it so that the spell banning trespassing will lift for an hour at the stroke of midnight. Which is why…”

“I should go? Got it. Draw me a map,” Oscar said.

“Will you be all right by yourself?” Tinasha inquired.

“You’d get in trouble if you went and got caught, right? I’ll be fine,” he assured her.

Despite her concern, Tinasha drew him a map to the treasure vault and a diagram showing where the box was in the large chamber. Oscar examined them before stowing them in his jacket.

Tinasha looked up at him, feeling lonely. He caught her gaze and grimaced, looking put on the spot. “Don’t make that face.”

“What face?” she questioned.

“Oh, you know,” he answered vaguely.

The girl puffed up her cheeks, pouting, but Oscar pulled her gently into his arms. He sighed into her ear, “Now I can finally see you again…”

Affection bled into his voice, and Tinasha’s heart twinged painfully.

He didn’t mean the girl here in front of him. Tonight, he would leave. When she thought of that, quite a bit of sadness welled up within her.

“Am I really going to marry you?” she asked.

“You are. Look forward to what happens in four hundred years.”

She burst out laughing at how questionable that sounded, but she also felt like she didn’t want to reject what he said. Softly, she leaned into his hold.

Shortly before midnight, Oscar unsheathed Akashia and placed Nark on his shoulder. He glanced at a pajama-clad Tinasha, who was gazing up at him worriedly.

Again, she cautioned, “I’ve placed an invisibility spell on you, but it will lift once you leave here if you speak. Be careful.”

“All right.”

“If it doesn’t work, return to me,” the girl appended.

“Don’t jinx it.”

“I mean, what happens if you get sent even further into the past…?” she fretted.

“Then I’ll go and see Lucrezia instead, I guess,” he mused.

Tinasha furrowed her brow at the name she didn't recognize.

Grinning, Oscar patted her head. "I'll be fine. More importantly…don't spend too much time with Lanak."

"What are you, some overbearing father?" Tinasha snapped.

"I'm not your father or your big brother. I'm your man," he stated.

When Tinasha heard that, she blushed bright red. He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Eyes narrowing fondly, she took his hand as if she didn't want to say good-bye yet. She intertwined their fingers, and he squeezed her hand.

"See you," Oscar said.

"Yeah… Be careful."

Tinasha watched him go without blinking once.

She had the vaguest sense that if she looked away, she'd start crying.

※

Tinasha's map proved accurate. Oscar found the stairs leading underground deep down a complicated hallway and descended them.

There were numerous guards along the way, but an eminently powerful candidate for the queen of Tuldarr had placed the invisibility spell on Oscar. Since birth, she had stood out from the rest. It cloaked him completely; no one noticed nor even sensed his presence as he snuck his way through the palace.

Oscar passed a dark stairway that led into an empty chamber of stone. The floor was square, and at the center was an opening with steps that descended farther underground.

That's…

He'd seen this place once before.

After checking to make sure no one was around, he lit the torch Tinasha had given him and proceeded down.

※

After Tinasha said good-bye to Oscar, she lay down in bed but tossed and turned from side to side, unable to sleep.

Did he reach the treasure vault safely? Has that mysterious magic implement already whisked him back to his original time?

Myriad worries rose in her mind one after another. She knew considering such things was pointless, but she couldn't stop herself from pondering. She regretted not going with him.

After tossing onto her other side for the thousandth time, she heard approaching footfalls.

"Oscar…!"

He came back.

Tinasha leaped out of bed and ran to the door. She flung it open and beheld the man standing there. Surprise was written all over his face. “Oh, Aeti… Were you awake?”

It wasn’t Oscar. It was her fiancé in name.

Startled by how disappointed she felt, Tinasha said, “Lanak? What’s going on so late?”

He looked askance, appearing slightly perturbed. Then he seemed to make up his mind and smiled. “Something good’s about to happen. You must come with me to see it.”

“Something good? At this time of night?” she questioned.

“Yeah,” Lanak replied, taking her hand without listening to her answer. Then he started to tow her along swiftly.

What in the world is going on? This is the first time he’s come to my room so late at night.

While Tinasha was puzzled, in the back of her mind, she recalled Oscar’s warning.

Even so, she couldn’t think of a reason to turn Lanak down, so she let him pull her along.

※

Soon after entering the treasure vault, Oscar found the box he was looking for. He picked up the tiny box and opened the lid to see the orb was indeed there. He let out a deep sigh.

Okay… This is it, all right.

As he reached out to touch the sphere, he suddenly found himself hesitating.

Was this really okay?

That was a question he’d had for a while now.

Why had he come to this time period? Was it not because he’d thought he could save her from her trauma had he been there?

Oscar looked down at his hands, frozen with hesitation.

If he rescued her from her fate, chances were high that history would be radically altered, just like in the old story of the son saving his mother. If he did this, he would probably never meet Tinasha.

The journey had been long for her, but now that she was married to him, she had finally attained happiness…

He tried to convince himself that way, but he couldn’t manage to reach out and touch the orb.

The girl’s innocent face dominated his thoughts.

Four hundred years…

That was how long it would take her to reach him.

It was such an agonizingly long time. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Suddenly, a white light burned the backs of his eyelids.

Ah!

The magic orb inside the box was glowing, just as it had when it sent him through time. He shuddered.

Nothing was decided yet. He hadn't made a decision.

Suddenly, the glow grew more powerful, searing his vision.

As the luminance swallowed him up—

He got his answer.

※

Lanak led Tinasha into the cathedral. As they climbed the central steps toward the altar, she noticed that a group of mages was waiting at the top.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Something good," he repeated reassuringly, smiling at her. Once the pair reached the top, he lifted her up in his arms, then slowly paced over to the altar. The dozen or so mages there observed silently.

The strange atmosphere shrouding everything was something stagnant and unknown to Tinasha. The gathered people eyed her like they were assessing an object. Feeling uncomfortable, Tinasha wanted to run away.

"Lanak…?" she said, staring at the boy holding her, the only person she relied on. He smiled at her, but his expression seemed a facade.

At last, they reached the altar. Very gently, Lanak set Tinasha down on it. She tried to get up, but he pressed her back down.

"What are you doing…?" she asked.

"Hush," he instructed, pinning her shoulders. Tinasha bore the pain in silence.

She could tell he took something from a recess in the altar.

Slowly, he raised it over her. It caught the rays of moonlight pouring in from the skylight, glittering silver.

Tinasha caught its shape but couldn't comprehend what it was.

It seemed too impossible to believe, and she gazed at the dagger in Lanak's hand as if this weren't happening to her.

"Aeti, stay still," he whispered, wearing the same gentle face he always had.

Then, without hesitating, he plunged the blade down toward her belly.

She couldn't even close her eyes. Whatever words she wanted to scream were gone. Fear had gripped her, holding her still as she bore witness to the dagger plunging toward her—

And the swipe of something else knocking it away.

The blade that should have cut her belly open spun through the air.

A man had deflected the weapon a hairbreadth before it touched her skin. Akashia in hand, he kicked Lanak away. He fell next to the altar, but Oscar didn't spare him a glance.

He helped Tinasha sit up. "I made it in time. This is why I told you not to spend time with him."

"O-Oscar… Why?"

“Stand, fight. You can do that, can’t you?” he said firmly.

Despite Tinasha’s confusion, his words compelled her to nod. She got off the altar and stood next to him.

The mages grew angry at the intrusion. Each one began to recite an incantation.

“Kill that man!” Lanak shouted, clutching his abdomen in pain.

Tinasha blanched. This was the boy she’d known since childhood, the one the girl thought she knew so well, yet now he was glaring at her with a look of loathing she had never seen before.

“What…? Lanak?”

Unable to understand what was happening, Tinasha was frozen as solid as if she were cursed. Oscar put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. We’ll figure this out.”

The mages’ conjured fire vortex was fast approaching them. Tinasha tried to call up a barrier, but she was so shaken she had a hard time forming the spell.

Oscar pushed her behind him, then swung Akashia at the flames. The spell was torn to pieces, and the inferno dispersed, leaving only a heat haze in the air. A ripple of shock ran through the gathered mages.

“Put up a barrier. Protect yourself,” Oscar tersely instructed the girl behind him. Then he charged at the nearest mage.

The mage hurriedly tried to erect some manner of defense, but Oscar approached quickly and made a diagonal cut through the magic shield and its master. With a short scream and a spray of blood, the mage fell to the ground.

Oscar looked to the next-nearest opponent, but realized that an invisible sword was winging his way. He lifted Akashia to cancel it out, but it vanished into thin air. He looked back at the altar to see that a grim-looking Tinasha had cast a spell.

He smiled at that, then resumed his attack. His weapon cleaved through another mage’s neck. With another shower of blood, the magic user fell slowly to the ground. Beyond the body, he could see Tinasha hurling balls of light at two more mages.

Before long, Oscar and Tinasha had dispatched most of their enemies.

Excepting Lanak, only three mages remained.

Suddenly, a mad, cackling laugh rang out from behind. Tinasha flinched.

She and Oscar turned around to see Lanak, dagger in hand, cackling loudly and gleefully. After his joyous fit concluded, he narrowed his eyes, and his face went blank. He stared at Tinasha with a gaze as cold as snow—snow that was the same shade as his hair.

“You’re unbelievable, Aeti… Where did you get that man from? You exist for me,” he spat.

“And that’s why she should submit to being your sacrifice? So you can use her flesh as a catalyst to summon up magical power?” Oscar fired back, his voice as chilly as Lanak’s.

Tinasha looked between the two of them, wide-eyed.

She didn't doubt Oscar, but she still wished Lanak would deny the accusation.

He'd been with Tinasha since birth. She'd thought that regardless of which became the ruler and which the consort, nothing would change between them.

Even after watching Lanak try to stab her, she wanted to trust him. Half of her probably still did.

Lanak saw the pleading in Tinasha's eyes and smiled. "Aeti… Poor, pitiful Aeti. I love you. I think you're beautiful. But that magic of yours is in my way. I get irritated just looking at it," he snarled hatefully.

Tinasha was shocked, and he laughed at her. "No one hoped that you would grow to be the stronger one. And yet you studied on your own like a foolish little girl… You should have left it all to me. If you had, I would have protected you like I used to," he said, his words dripping with scorn. So many different emotions bled into his tone that it was impossible to tell what was real.

Anger? Resentment? Inadequacy? Compassion? Tinasha knew none of those feelings. She swayed on her feet unsteadily, about to fall. Oscar's voice caught her before she tumbled right onto the altar.

"Don't listen to him, Tinasha. His words are poison. You're better than he is. Be strong. Believe."

He was full of conviction; there was no doubt at all in what he said.

His emotions seeped into her. They were steady as a rock, supporting and lifting the girl to her feet. Oscar believed in her strength more than anyone else in the world.

Tinasha looked up and stared right back at Lanak. He was seething with resentment, but he seemed so distant and small.

"Both of us are poor and pitiful," she stated.

The two had been chosen to rule as mere children. They had been thrust into lives tormented by loneliness and expectation.

While Tinasha was suffering through her solitude, Lanak had also been snapping under the weight of his own burdens. But she was too much of a child to notice his pain.

However, a ruler needed to always remain strong, even when overwhelmed by the responsibility thrust upon them.

Tinasha let out a long, reedy sigh.

Once her lungs were empty, she straightened up. She turned to face Lanak, the one person she'd thought understood her, head-on.

"Lanak… No matter if you hate or resent me, I've had enough. Thank you for your friendship up until now. And…if you want to kill me, I accept the challenge."

As she finished speaking, the aura around her changed. It went from that of an insecure girl to the brilliant royal hues of a ruler. It was as if beautiful,

graceful wings sprouted from her back, as if she were a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. Powerful magic converged around her.

"Aeti…," Lanak muttered, falling back a step under her overawing and intimidating presence. Internally, he began to panic.

He glanced at the pair whose eyes were fixed solidly on him. Both were strong, inexhaustible opponents. Lanak focused on the feel of the dagger in his hand.

He had thought there was no way he would fail. He had believed that this would change everything.

Unfortunately, he was standing with his back to the corner.

However, he couldn't hesitate here.

Doing so would ensure his conviction as the criminal who'd tried to murder the future queen out of selfish desire. More than that, however, he couldn't abide yielding and bending the knee to her.

"If I just had that power…," he muttered, grinding his teeth.

Lanak eyed the mages who were standing petrified behind Oscar and Tinasha. Deciding upon something, he barked an order at them. "Start the incantation!"

"Y-Your Highness…"

"Do it now!" he yelled.

The three mages were confused, but they began reciting the spell. Oscar knit his brows as he looked over at them.

Bright moonlight illuminated the cathedral.

Lanak took a deep breath in, then lifted the dagger and shouted, "My great desire shall grant me pure strength! Use this flesh as a catalyst, O power! Appear!"

As he spoke, he plunged the dagger into his own stomach.

Blood spurted and oozed.

Tinasha was at a loss for words at what he had done.

Through it all, the mages kept reciting the spell.

After a long few moments, an enormous amount of magical power manifested above Lanak.

Even as he fell to his knees, clutching his bloody stomach, Lanak's eyes glittered with ambition. Tinasha gaped at him, dazed. He reached out to reel in the magic in the air that he had summoned. The congealed mass began slowly entering his body per his will.

The wound on his belly started to heal oddly rapidly.

As more and more power flowed into him, Lanak crowed in triumph, "Look, Aeterna! I'm more powerful than you!"

He placed his bloody hands on the floor, pushed himself to his feet, and then faced the two who had dared to oppose him. Narrowing one eye nastily, he flung a hand out toward Oscar. "I'll start with you… Let me show you what a king's power looks like."

The boy amassed a colossal amount of magic. Oscar clicked his tongue and held Akashia ready, but was perplexed when no spell formed in Lanak's hand.

Lanak himself seemed to find this just as unexpected, and he blinked at his empty palms. "What's going on…?"

Meanwhile, more and more magic was getting summoned up and absorbed into Lanak's body. Tinasha noticed that Lanak's eyes were unnaturally bloodshot as he stared down at his hands, and she cried out, "No! Stop the summoning!"

"Shut up, you little brat!" Lanak roared at her, trying even more desperately to cast a spell.

Again, nothing took shape. He had too much magic and couldn't wield it well.

There was a grating sound growing within the young man's body. Acute pain lanced through him.

Lanak's veins ruptured all over. He was aghast to see his arms turning a mottled red.

He couldn't take any more. Though he tried to call off the chanting, he had lost the power of speech. Waves of magic kept inundating him.

Very close by, he heard the sound of something snapping before his world went dark.

Magic continued to pour into Lanak's twitching form, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Oh no…," Tinasha said, firing magic at him to stop the summoning.

As she did, Oscar turned back and cut down the three mages in succession. Fresh puddles of crimson greased the floor of the sanctuary.

Terrified, Tinasha gasped, "No. I can't stop it…"

Her magic was repelled the second before it reached Lanak. Fearsome magical power swirled into a vortex around the boy, who swayed at the center of the storm.

Tinasha stood motionless when Oscar returned to her. That was when Lanak's body could no longer withstand the magic pouring into it and finally burst open from the inside. As a huge hole opened in his abdomen, bits of flesh scattered all over the floor. Tinasha gasped, and Oscar steadied her shoulders from behind.

"…Lanak."

His death was so abrupt and much too sudden; she couldn't even mourn.

Unfortunately, even the young man's demise didn't stop the power from manifesting. Using Lanak's scattered blood and flesh as an intermediary, even more magic gushed into the world.

With its host gone, the energy congealed and quickly assumed the form of a gigantic tornado.

"No…," Tinasha murmured, frozen in place.

"Uh-oh. Tinasha, we need to get away," Oscar said, placing her under his arm, turning around, and leaping down the stairs.

As they did, the tornado spun, whipping up anything that was in the cathedral and ripping it apart. Guards rushed in, alerted by the strange commotion.

They were taken aback to see Tinasha and the storm in the cathedral. “Lady Aeterna, what in the world…?”

“L-Lanak used himself as a catalyst to summon up magic…and failed to control it…,” she explained, reciting what she’d seen but feeling like her voice wasn’t her own.

Tinasha looked back at the ever-expanding vortex of power. “If we don’t do something, it might destroy Tuldarr.”

The soldiers paled when they heard that. In the meantime, the tornado broke through the sanctuary ceiling, ripping up the stone paving as it steadily grew larger and larger.

“C-call His Majesty…,” one soldier managed.

“He’s bedridden! This is too much for him…,” replied another.

Unable to do anything, they stared up at the deadly spectacle in despair.

What they were witnessing was the beginning of total destruction.

As time seemed to stand still, one person took action. Oscar muttered to himself, “…That’s enough.”

“Oscar?” said Tinasha.

Had he realized something? Using Akashia against that tornado would be meaningless. Even if he neutralized one part of that gigantic bundle of chaotic, unbound magic, the rest of it would engulf him instantly.

Oscar sighed and patted Tinasha on the shoulder. “You do it. Control it.”

She stared at him in shock. “I can’t! You saw what it did to Lanak, didn’t you?!”

“You can. I know you can,” he assured her.

Tinasha held her breath, staring at Oscar.

He had total and complete faith in her. A firmness glinted in his eyes.

This was someone who looked ahead, never hesitating. Tinasha had the sense that just being near him could make her stronger, too.

As she gazed at her reflection in his eyes, she asked, “Really…?”

“Yes. This is your country. It’ll be all right. You have time. I’ll protect you,” he declared, taking hold of her hands from behind.

Her slender frame leaned against his for support.

“We’ll beat it. It won’t even be a close call. I’ve got you,” he whispered in her ear.

Tinasha sucked in a deep breath. His body warmth was comforting.

Even without closing her eyes, she could sense the flow of magic quite distinctly. What Oscar had stated echoed in her mind over and over.

I can do it…

She made up her mind and let out a long, thin breath.

“I’m going out there,” she decided.

※

Though she had lived in solitude all her life, she had never thought it an unfortunate fate.

The girl was blessed, and she felt that expressing disappointment was rude to the people who cared for her.

At times, she despised her power.

She also longed for the parents she had never known. Occasionally, she dreamed of what life would be like as a normal girl.

But now, enough was enough.

Power didn't control people.

People wielded power.

There was no debating this.

She would conquer every last drop of her strength.

※

Tinasha couldn't even scream at the terrible pressure pushing down on her whole body.

If Oscar weren't behind her, holding her up, she wouldn't be able to stay standing.

She pulled the masterless magic to her, drew it inside, established control, and made it her own. She swallowed down that indigestible mass. As the process repeated over and over, an excruciating pain flayed her body and soul.

However, each time she writhed in pain, the man tightened his hold on her wrists. *It's all right*, he seemed to be saying, comforting her even as she nearly crumpled.

Magic raged within and without her, and Tinasha gritted her teeth hard to keep from losing herself. Time and time again, she rode out hallucinations that her very identity was bleeding out and filling the room.

The storm seemed like it would never end. When the violent waves of magic at last subsided, she realized that Oscar was holding her tight in his arms. Her legs were shaking so much she couldn't stand, and Oscar was wrapped around her, practically lifting her in his arms.

Tinasha tried to reach for his face, but the slightest movement of her fingers sent sharp pain lancing through her.

She couldn't even speak, and Oscar rested his cheek against hers. "It's all right. It's over. You did well."

The best she could do was smile in reply.

Oscar picked her up and sat her down on a chair against the wall that had managed to survive the chaos. Laying a hand along her pallid face, he kissed her young, innocent lips—the smallest tinge of red colored her fair cheeks.

He drew back and solemnly gazed at her. "Tinasha, I ended up lying to you. I'm sorry."

"Oscar…?"

“I came here to save you. So…I won’t see you again. I’ve overwritten it.”

“What?” she said, her eyes growing round. Despite the pain, she placed her hands on either side of his face. “Why…? You only have to return to your original time, right?”

Oscar grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t have anywhere to return to anymore. It disappeared when I came to this time.”

“Disappeared…?”

“Even if you redo the past, the world won’t branch off into multiple timelines. That’s what that magic orb has always existed to do. It’s a tool that warps the past and overwrites it.”

In the old story of the swordsman who saved his mother, why had the man who came from his own time vanished?

It was because the world didn’t have multiple versions. If you tried to change the past, the world would begin to rewrite time anew from the point of divergence. The moment the orb was activated, the caster’s world would vanish.

The world Oscar had lived in, the witch who became his wife, and everything he had risked his life to protect—none of it existed anymore. And not only that—

“So…now that I’ve carried out my task, I’ll disappear soon, too.”

Oscar had never existed here, so he would also vanish once the past was corrected.

He’d understood that as soon as the orb had emitted that white light. The glow had made him remember, reminding him to carry out what he wished to do.

Oscar’s unconscious wish had been so utterly simple. He’d wanted to be there to take Tinasha’s hand when she was suffering the most.

That modest desire, combined with his steadfast love, had sent him to this time.

If he had known from the start what kind of power the magic orb held, he probably wouldn’t have chosen to change the past.

That would be to deny the path the witch had traveled this whole time.

Tinasha’s history, and the beautiful spirit and tenacity that had carried her through it, were parts of what formed Oscar’s beloved wife—his one and only. While he had touched her scars, he had never wanted to erase them. Bitter though it was, he had accepted them just like he had the mark on her back.

His desire to erase all the suffering she’d experienced was childish and selfish.

Still, he’d made the wish.

Oscar, stop trying to do everything on your own. You’ve got me!

The man winced, feeling as if he could hear Tinasha scolding him with an exasperated look on her face.

She was the witch he'd met in the tower that stood tall on the wasteland. Long had she lived. She was a creature of beauty, loneliness, and most of all, kindness.

Despite countless injuries, she would stand undaunted.

To her, it seemed natural that she should distance herself from humans.

Oscar's wish had been born from his love of Tinasha. He wanted her always to be smiling happily by his side.

Looking back on it, the time they'd spent together had passed by so quickly.

So joyful it was like a miracle; so content it was like a dream.

Days seemed so much more fulfilling with her around. Even amid his work, her presence felt freeing.

The innocent love she gave elated him so much. Even the most uneventful of times were fun.

He had cherished her more than his own self…more than his country.

That unrestrained passion was unsuitable for a king.

If Tinasha had ever learned of it, it would make her sad.

Thus Oscar had hidden the emotions roiling inside him and presented her only with a love that was clear and calm.

Because he wanted her, the one by his side, to ever smile without sorrow.

They could live together until the day they died, as a king and queen who would eventually be lost among the annals of history.

That would be perfect happiness…and already a dream never to come true.

Even so, he had no regrets that this was how things would end.

"Oscar… That can't be true… I mean…," Tinasha said, tears spilling over as she realized what Oscar meant.

He wiped her face and smiled at her. "Be a good queen, Tinasha. You can do it."

She shook her head like a child throwing a tantrum. Grimacing, Oscar patted her head. "Even though history has changed, the fact that I met you and the time we spent together will not fade away."

Even if he were to start this whole thing over again, he was confident he'd still wind up back here, at the same ending.

To ensure she could smile without sorrow, he would give her a new future and happiness.

Despite everything changing, Oscar didn't want to regret his actions. That was how much he felt for her.

"Even if you forget, even if I forget, even if we never encounter each other—I love you."

In the face of the sobbing girl before him, he could see traces of the witch's blushing smile.

An exceedingly rare woman.

The witch he fell in love with.

His affection for her blinded him. He wanted to protect her, even if that meant losing her forever.

Thus this was the inevitable end he had chosen.

Oscar reached out and gently took the girl into his arms. She piped up in a hoarse voice, “Oscar… Wait…”

“Close your eyes,” he said, and she did. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She understood what was happening, but couldn’t comprehend it. It seemed too terrible to accept.

There was no way she felt at all mentally prepared. Everything that was important to her was slipping through her fingers.

Tinasha clutched tight to Oscar's shoulders. That simple action sent pain shooting through her body, but she ignored it. Fear of loss had her trembling.

"…Don't go."

That was all she wished for.

Tinasha could stand four hundred years if it meant seeing him again. The girl knew she was capable of holding out alone.

Thinking of him waiting for her in the future would allow her to overcome any difficulty.

That was why she didn't want him to disappear.

Tinasha buried her face in Oscar's chest, clinging to him. His body heat warmed her shivering frame.

She drew a breath.

Nothing happened.

This time she took a deeper inhalation and let it flow out. He was still stroking her head.

It's okay. He's right here with me…

Yet just as relief began to rise, the warmth that was surrounding Tinasha suddenly vanished. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

A destroyed cathedral filled with soldiers staring at her.

That was all that was before her. She looked all around like a lost child.

"…Oscar?" she murmured, but there was no one who would answer.

Stunned, she looked down at her own empty hands.

"Ah…"

Large, fresh droplets formed in the corners of the young woman's eyes, which now seemed like gates to an ebon abyss…

She burst into pained wails and sobs.

※

Knowledge of the madness that had afflicted Tuldarr's prince, the potential king, was buried along with him.

The following year, a young and beautiful queen took the throne.

She possessed striking beauty and a great deal of power. As a ruler, she was both wise and deeply compassionate to her subjects. Tuldarr, a nation long characterized by its solitude in the world, began to open up to other countries.

This was a story of a time far in the past, now long buried in the pages of history.

END OF *UNNAMED MEMORY* ACT ONE

Intermission Refusing to Despair

Clasping the young child's body to her, the woman wept.

The child was cold and lifeless.

Dead. Lost, irrevocably.

She sobbed for this life that could never be recovered. No price seemed too steep if it could mean the little one's return.

How far back in time would she need to go? She was ready to forfeit her own life in exchange. The woman would gladly suffer any torture if it brought the child back to life.

But that wouldn't work.

She knew it wouldn't. No magic could undo death. It was something beyond even the power of a god.

That knowledge was little comfort and did not give her reason to wish otherwise.

"Someone, please… Save my baby…"

Her wails echoed through the world. Tears soaked her pale, bloodless cheeks.

Then she looked up, sensing that someone was suddenly standing near her.

A figure was staring down at her. But she didn't know who it was.

All she could feel was a presence that said, "*I'm right here.*"

"…Who are you?"

There was no answer.

Whoever it was, they were gazing at the woman. A voice spoke, genderless and sorrowful.

"Are you prepared to do anything to save your child?"

So began the altering of destiny.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Kuji Furumiya.

Thank you for reading *Unnamed Memory*, Vol. 3.

To any of you who may be reading the afterword before the book, please don't. As I warned previously, this volume deals with the end of Oscar and Tinasha's contract, and the Age of Witches ends here.

At the same time, it is also an end (for now) to the king and the witch's story. Thank you for following it through to the conclusion.

From this point on, we'll be following another tale that's existed in the shadows until now.

Why was Oscar cursed? What were those strange fragments that sometimes surfaced in his memories? What did Valt and Miralys know? What was happening in this world?

The new story will answer all these unsolved mysteries.

After delving into Tinasha and her past, we will now focus on Oscar's history and the truth of it.

I would be thrilled to know you all continue enjoying this story.

Now it's time to offer some thanks and apologies once again.

To my editors, who always have to deal with my many worries, I am so sorry. Thank you. Because of both of you, I managed to conceptualize everything thus far, and I am full of gratitude for your extraordinary assistance.

Thank you to chibi, who once again provided us with some gorgeous illustrations! I was so deeply moved to see the art of my heroine in her wedding gown for the cover. I'm sorry that Tinasha is always wearing new outfits and was a different age this time, too! Thank you for creating so many compelling drawings, including ones of new characters!

Tappei Nagatsuki followed up the endorsement blurb he wrote me for Volume 1 with some notes included in this one, and for that, I'm very grateful!

I'm deeply appreciative and not at all worthy of such magnificent commentary. What I mean to say is that I'm profoundly moved! Tappei Nagatsuki wrote a commentary! For my book! Thank you so much!

And once again, thank you to the Light Novel News website for publishing an interview with me when the second volume came out! It was my first time having a conversation with a reporter about so many topics, and the interview packaged up my incoherent ramblings in a delightful way. There was one point where my editor and I gave a vague answer like, “Ah, well… After the contract ends…who can say what will happen? Ha-ha-ha.” That’s this volume here. I’m sorry.

Finally, thank you so very much to all the readers who have stuck with me up until now.

Ten years have passed since I first put this story up online, but you’ve stuck with it and continued to show it love, which makes me feel so gratified. I hope from the bottom of my heart that someday, years from now, you remember this tale and return to it.

We’ll meet again in some unnamed reminiscence.

Thank you so much!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra

“I want to do that, too. Teach me how,” said her husband.

“What?” asked Tinasha, turning around from her seat at her vanity mirror. She picked up the braid in her hair she had just done. “You mean this? Your hair isn’t long enough to braid.”

“I want to braid *your* hair. It looks fun,” he replied.

Though she shook her head with some exasperation over the king’s spontaneous request, Tinasha gave in almost immediately. She waved him over from where he was sitting on the bed and handed him a white hair ribbon.

“Divide the hair into three parts, then cross an outer part over the inner one. Alternate and repeat that. Then tie it in place with this ribbon,” she instructed.

Oscar stood behind her and clumsily braided a lock of his wife’s hair. As Tinasha watched him do that in the mirror, she asked an obvious question. “Well? Is it fun?”

“It is. It’s just as enjoyable as petting a cat’s fur,” he answered.

After weaving together and undoing Tinasha’s locks three times, he finally made quite a pretty braid. Feeling pleased with the result, he tied the end with the white ribbon as if it were something he regularly did.

The little memory had come to him so suddenly.

“Oscar, is it done?” inquired the girl.

He let go of the white ribbons at the end. “Yup. It looks cute.”

“Really? Let me go look in the mirror,” she chirped, springing to her feet excitedly. She looked like a miniature version of his wife. Tinasha examined her hair in the mirror, picking up the plait. “Is it…cute? I’m not really used to this style. Is this what I wear as an adult?”

“Hmm, who can say? You’re cute as you are, so it hardly matters,” he replied evasively.

“…What’s with that answer? Are you saying I look childish?” Tinasha pouted, her reddened cheeks puffing up at how he’d dodged the question. She was the one who wanted to know about her adult self, but the ways of her heart appeared to be complex.

Wincing as he walked over to her, Oscar placed a hand on her little head. “You *are* still a child, so you can do whatever you want. There’s no need to act like the adult you.”

Oscar pulled out both of the white ribbons, and Tinasha held on to her hair as it loosened. “Is it really okay to act like a kid?”

“It is. At the very least, you can relax when you’re with me.”

Even if this younger Tinasha had no memory of their life together, Oscar did. That was enough.

He pressed a kiss to the white ribbons…and held the precious things tight in his hand.

Commentary Notes from Nagatsuki Tappei

Hello, world, this is what Kuji Furumiya is all about!

I'd like to start by saying that while some people read the afterword before the main story, there's no way anyone would read the commentary notes before the book itself, right?

Even so, if you've finished reading the third volume of *Unnamed Memory* and now you've made it to this commentary section, I think you'll heartily approve of what I've chosen to put at the beginning of my portion:

"Hello, world, this is what Kuji Furumiya is all about!"

Unnamed Memory is a story originally published as a web novel on a personal site in 2008 that made waves because it was beautifully written, because it had fully realized characters, and more than anything, because the world-building felt rich and complete. Apparently, anyway.

I say "apparently" because, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I began reading this series online without knowing anything about its popularity at the time.

However, I can assert that it was one of the happiest moments in my life as a reader when I went into *Unnamed Memory* knowing nothing about it. I literally spent three days and three nights—forgetting all about my deadlines—in a state of supreme bliss, greedily consuming this story.

As it happens, I already knew Kuji Furumiya when I read *Unnamed Memory*, and with no shame at all, I sent her a long message containing my thoughts on the book. I also bowed and scraped in apology for having only a passing, casual acquaintance with the author of such a masterpiece.

After many twists and turns, I ended up writing an endorsement blurb for Volume 1 of *Unnamed Memory* when it was published in print form, and now I'm writing a commentary for Volume 3, which has folded the story back on itself.

I have to say, one never knows where their life as a reader will take them.

All right, that's enough of my very long preamble. I have a task before me, so let's get to it.

It goes without saying by now, but *Unnamed Memory* is a gem of a series.

It took only ten years after the story was completed online for the long-awaited print novel version to come out. The online version I read and the three published books that have been put out so far are all fantastic.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you how gorgeous the books' binding and illustrations are, but above anything else, their story is beautiful.

I'm sorry to bring my personal preference into this, but for me, whether or not a story is "beautiful" is highly important to my enjoyment of it.

I define this very vaguely, and I don't just mean literal beauty. Depending on the person, you might call it "emotional attachment" or "quality."

According to my own definition, the beauty in the story of *Unnamed Memory* is among the best of the best.

In a vast land, there are five witches of immense power, and the newest of these witches grants the wishes of those who conquer her tower. And then a tragic prince cursed by an old witch never to bear children takes on the tower's challenges. When the witch and the prince meet, what follows is a fairy tale that shakes the world they live in.

How can this starting point that evokes the opening lines of a great epic poem that is both heartrending and ephemeral lead to Tinasha and Oscar's everyday adventures as they bicker like a married couple?

The witch and the prince meet, form a contract, and leave the tower together. That alone could take up a lengthy book all on its own, but the author's expression and skill turn it into a well-paced, detail-rich prologue.

After that, our setting changes to the royal castle, where a series of fantasy-style mysteries unfold. The author uses her impressive literary style to depict several variations on stories reminiscent of folklore and fairy tales and potent magical battles that, at times, involve the entire mainland. One giant creature appears per volume! This time it was a castle!

Oops. I can't forget to discuss Tinasha and Oscar's romantic comedy antics. This pair keeps bickering over whether she will or won't marry him, surrounded by a circle of fond onlookers. The one thing getting in the way of their union is the witch's pride!

A good story must belie the reader's predictions while heightening anticipation.

In terms of continuing to meet that requirement, *Unnamed Memory* is a tale of high quality.

Every individual adventure is thoroughly described and tied together cohesively. With these as the background, a charming cast of characters runs about fully realized. The story structure, calculated down to the minutest detail, shows that the author is fully dedicated to crafting

entertainment that will delight readers. It's what makes the story as supremely beautiful as it is.

This is also evident from the structure, which goes from the "great epic poem that is both heartrending and ephemeral," which the reader first pictures in the story prologue, to a series of vignettes that allow us to glimpse the witch and the prince from all angles, before wrapping everything up at the climax.

The curse that eats away at Oscar, and the shackles of the word that label Tinasha a witch.

To find joy in everyday life without giving in to the burden of inescapable fate and the untimely end you can't fight against—that is what Oscar and Tinasha do. They cherish the irreplaceable time they have together, a fact that will strike readers upon every reread.

The end of Volume 3 of *Unnamed Memory* also marks the end of Act One of the story.

Readers who have read this far are probably unsure how Tinasha and Oscar's adventure can even continue after this. I imagine they're on pins and needles, confused and wondering if their legend ends here.

As things move into Act Two, readers' hearts will be toyed with by developments that significantly differ from what we've seen previously.

However, as someone who knows what the final half of the story entails, allow me to tell you not to fear, wise readers.

If you've enjoyed things thus far, I guarantee that you will love what's to come.

And once you've read the ending of *Unnamed Memory* with your own eyes, I want you to be sure to remember these words:

Hello, world, this is what Kuji Furumiya is all about!

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